

The Educational Theories of Cornelius Van Til

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<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased though the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jew and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (I Corinthians 1:20-25)

#### *Background*

Cornelius Van Til lived from 1895 to 1987. He was born in the Netherlands. When he was 10 years old his family moved to America, where he lived on a farm in Indiana. He studied at Calvin College and Princeton Theological Seminary and received his Ph.D. from Princeton University. He taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, and was among the founding faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, when a small group of fundamentalist professors departed from Princeton in protest over a liberal turn in both the Presbyterian Church and in Princeton Seminary. (White, 1979; Westminster, 1987)

The focus of Van Til's life work was to defend the orthodox faith from the onslaught of modernity. His most famous work *The Defense of the Faith* was derived from his Apologetic syllabus. Van Til taught apologetics for a year at Princeton Theological Seminary and then for forty-three years at Westminster Theological Seminary. (White, 1979)

In addition to his work in apologetics he applied his philosophical theology to the field of education. Van Til's method in apologetics is called Presuppositionalism, an approach that examines one's basic assumptions and foundational beliefs. Van Til believed that a person's presuppositions were stronger than any argument because they are rooted in one's faith commitment.

#### *The Importance of Van Til's Educational Theories*

There are several reasons why the educational theories of Cornelius Van Til are important. First, Van Til was part of the Dutch reformed or Calvinist day school movement in both the Netherlands and America. As a boy he attended a two-room schoolhouse in a close Dutch reformed community in Hammond, Indiana. During his days as professor at Westminster he founded an independent Christian school (PhilMont Christian Academy) that still serves close to 800 students on three campuses in suburban Philadelphia. (Oppewal, 1963; Westminster, 1987)

The establishment of Dutch reformed day schools has a unique and important history in America. In 1847, a year before Horace Mann, the father of American education, would complete his tenure as secretary to the board of education of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, another parallel educational movement was developing. It would be more than a decade before the publication of Spencer's *What*

*Knowledge is of Most Importance?*, or Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*, or the birth of John Dewey. In 1847, Dutch reformed Christians migrated from the Netherlands to pursue religious liberty, much like the puritans, and settled throughout America establishing the Christian schools they had sacrificed so much to have. Their motivation was the freedom to educate their children in religious schools not controlled by the government. (Ellis, 2003; Oppewal, 1963)

The establishment of the Reformed schools predates the debate in this country between traditionalists and progressives. So in this way it was not a reaction to a public school system that was either too traditional or too progressive. This was not about class size, test scores, or reading curriculum. Rather, it was a decision based on religious convictions, and a philosophy of education that considered faith more essential than anything else. This was not a protest movement, but a positive philosophical project.

Second, of the four great European epochs that influenced American education, we are apt to hear most about the Enlightenment, then perhaps about Romanticism and the Renaissance, but least of all do we hear of the Reformation's influence on American Education. The Dutch reformed (or Calvinist) schools were founded on principles derived from the Reformation. Though outside the common school and public school movements, they have nevertheless been influential on the American educational landscape. Sometimes, however, these Reformed principles are most conspicuous by their absence, as is the case in most Christian schools founded by fundamentalists and evangelicals. But even in these cases, examining the educational philosophy and theories of Cornelius Van Til may shed light on the educational philosophy and theories found in majority of Christian schools.

Third, Van Til and other reformed writers may bring a new perspective to the ongoing traditionalist/progressive debate, speaking as it were from outside the circle. From Van Til's perspective the similarities may be more significant than the differences between traditionalists and progressives and the debate may be more of a "family quarrel" (Van Til, 1990b, p.56).

Finally, teachers in Christian schools may appreciate a fresh perspective on the distinctives of a Christian education. Is a Christian school just a public school with some prayer and Bible reading sprinkled on a common curriculum? Van Til helps answer the question, what makes a Christian school unique?

#### *The Target Audience*

Is Van Til's work for the Christian school teacher only or the public school teacher as well? Van Til's tradition does make him more naturally suited to a Christian school audience. He often speaks of the covenantal nature of education and of the mission of assisting parents in the Christian nurture of their children. I think he would have said that it was antithetical for a Christian parent to send his or her child to a school where the education was based on non-Christian presuppositions. He often speaks of the antithesis between theists, (as he would call those that believe in the self-attesting God of scripture) and anti-theists (those that presuppose in their thinking that Man is the measure of all things). Such a firm unwavering line of demarcation can make a person uncomfortable.

However, I am not aware that Van Til ever suggested that a Christian should not teach in the public school system and in fact, I believe his work would be valuable in a public school context. I am reminded of Daniel who served effectively and with integrity

as chief of the magicians in the diverse cultural environment of the Babylonian court. Perhaps Daniel was able to do that because, like Van Til, he understood the presuppositions and worldviews of the other wise men, sorcerers, and magicians in the court and lived faithfully for the God of the Bible.

Whatever our school context, Van Til's thinking can inform our understanding of the nature of the student, the nature of knowledge, and our ethical practices. He can speak to the traditionalist/progressive debate, and perhaps he can provide perspective on the presuppositions of philosophers such as Plato, Kant, and Dewey.

### *Van Til and Modernity*

Van Til's work took place in the context of the growing influence of higher critical theory in regard to Biblical scholarship and the controversy of modernity's influence at Princeton and in the Presbyterian Church.

Modernity says that I can create meaning entirely through the use of human reason. An autonomous person does not need any authority or teacher or god to tell her what is true. She can depend on her own senses and on her own experience. Spretnak (1991) describes the movement from pre-modern times to modern times:

The cult of modernity promised a world of peace, freedom, and fulfillment if we would just trust in an instrumental rationality and never look back at our past, so embarrassingly superstitious, communal, and constraining to the freewheeling, autonomous individual, *homo economicus*. (p. 11)

Christians have tended to respond to modernity in one of two ways. For some there was the attempt to synthesize modernity with Christianity. For others there was the rejection of reason and the adoption of anti-intellectualism.

For some Christians the relationship between faith and reason has been problematic. Those who sought to synthesize rationalism and faith, allowed reason to precede faith. The ancient Latin slogan “*Intelligo et credo - I understand and I believe*” expresses this approach. In other words, faith rested on understanding. Van Til would say that this approach neglects the radical effects of the fall. Calvin would agree, saying that human depravity has rendered autonomous reason incapable of satisfactorily anchoring its truth claims to anything objectively certain. (Calvin) In this synthesis approach there is a genuine belief in the ability and trustworthiness of human reason in its search for knowledge, even religious knowledge. The theologian who has adopted modernity makes an effort to ground faith upon empirical and/or historically verifiable facts. Van Til (1990b) comments that,

The fight on this sector of the front is sometimes waged as though the issue could be settled by the data alone and once for all. So also men sometimes fight about the trustworthiness of the Scripture as though the next move of someone’s spade in Palestine could determine everything. (p. 46)

Christians have also responded by rejecting reason altogether. “*Credo quia absurdum est - I believe because it is absurd*” is the ancient slogan that expresses this sentiment. This position accents the paradoxical character of Christian teaching to the point that it asserts that Christian truth is not capable of rational analysis. They espouse experientialism as independent of, or superior to, the objective character and authority of Scripture for establishing truth. Perhaps this anti-intellectual sentiment was manifested during the trial of Tennessee *v. John Scopes*, the Great Monkey trial of 1925. William Jennings Bryant is quoted as saying, “It is better to trust in the Rock of Ages than to

know the age of rocks; it is better for one to know that he is close to the Heavenly father than to know how far the stars in the heavens are apart!" (McGowen, 1990, p.24).

Van Til own position is that he would place belief over reason, and in this way he says, true reason is established. Van Til echoes the words of Anselm of Canterbury, "Nor do I seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand. For I believe this too, that 'unless I believe I shall not understand.' (Isaiah 7:9)" "*Credo ut intelligam - I believe in order that I may understand,*" is the ancient slogan that Van Til embraces. He presupposes the supernatural revelation of God's Word as providing the only basis for the entire educational enterprise. "Human beings," he says, "must presuppose the self-attesting triune God in all their thinking. Faith in God precedes understanding everything else" (Van Til).

#### *Van Til's View of Man*

Van Til's goal was to be faithful to God's Word and in that way use Biblical categories to define his philosophy. We find that beginning with his understanding of the nature of man. He uses the Biblical motifs of prophet, priest and king to inform his understanding of students and teachers. As image bearers of God we are called to function as prophets, as we gain meaning and understanding of God and his world from the revelation of God. We are also to function as priests as we dedicate ourselves and all things to God and live, work, learn, and worship in His presence. We are to function as kings as we govern and develop God's creation. Following the pattern of ancient cultures a vassal king would serve under the authority of the sovereign King. In this way we reflect the character of the creator, the one spoke all creation into being and sustains it by



His word; who is present in all creation; and is the sovereign King over the entire universe. (Van Til, 1979)

Van Til describes how man fell from his created condition and “as a result ... has become a false prophet, a usurping king, and a self-serving priest” (Van Til, 1979, p. 116). As a false prophet he speaks his own word; a lie rather than the truth. As a self-serving priest, man directs all worship to himself rather than toward God. As a rebel, fallen man rules in his own name, rather than as a vice-regent under the Sovereign King. He becomes his own final authority. In this fallen condition, all things are affected, including our thinking and education. (Van Til, 1979)

For Van Til this is not the end of the story, because Christ came to fulfill the offices of prophet, priest and king, and to restore mankind. As prophet, Christ is the voice of the Father speaking words of hope to his people. He reveals God’s will and shows how God may be known. He is called the Word of God, and he came to earth preaching the gospel. As priest he is God’s very presence. He is the sacrifice offering up Himself to satisfy divine justice, atone for sins, and reconcile us to God. As king Christ is victorious in overcoming evil and restoring and protecting his people. (Van Til, 1979)

God’s people are restored to be true prophets - hearing, speaking and applying God’s word. They are true priests who serve faithfully again in the creator’s presence. And they are true kings serving as agents and stewards of the high King here on earth. (Van Til, 1979)

In using the motifs of prophet, priest, and king, Van Til also worked out another thematic framework common in Reformed theology, the themes of creation, fall and redemption. This framework allows a person to understand culture, society, relationships,

history, politics and the environment, to name but a few examples, from a distinctively Christian perspective, that takes into account the intrinsic value of God's handiwork, the negative impact of sin, and the hope and reconciliation that we find in Christ. (Wolters, 1994)

### *Implications for Education*

Van Til would see every student in the Christian school well educated in these facts. Using Van Til's Biblical perspective colors how we view students and teachers, as image bearers of God, how we understand our purpose, and how we understand our calling on this earth.

### *Van Til's Antithesis*

Van Til's treatment of the nature of mankind leads necessarily to his concept of the *antithesis*. Van Til explains that there is an antithesis in the way a theist and an *anti-theist* understand the world. Van Til does not use the terms atheist or agnostic, since he wants no suggestion of neutrality. From his perspective a person is either a believer in the God of the bible or an unbeliever. Thus the perception of each person, he says, is colored by his or her beliefs. (Van Til, 1955, 1990a, n.d.)

Van Til speaks of two antithetical worldviews. The one is the worldview that starts with the self-attesting God of scripture and listens dependently to His Word in creation and scripture. According to Van Til, for the believer, "everything is dark unless the current of God's revelation is turned on" (Van Til, 1990a, p. 4). Van Til claims that "we cannot even see any facts without this light" (Van Til, 1990a, p. 4). "Not a single fact can really be known and therefore be taught unless placed under the light of revelation of God" (Van Til, 1990a, p. 4).

He explains further what he means by this startling and dramatic statement that not a single fact can really be known. He talks about proximate similarities versus ultimate similarities, and proximate differences versus ultimate differences. There are some apparent similarities between the perception of the believer and unbeliever. For example, for both “two times two equals four,” would be a true statement. Both come to the same answer. This is a proximate similarity. However, if you go deeper there are differences in how this fact is understood. He explains that for the theist the fact “two time two equals four” is connected to numerical law, which is an expression of the will and nature of God. In other words, the thing that makes this simple fact true is the creative Word of God. For the unbeliever “two times two equals four” is a “brute” fact, which the unbeliever regards as being neutral and independent from any concept of God. This is an ultimate difference. “In one sense, we could... say that all men have the facts, since all live in God’s created order and all move in the general revelation of God” (Van Til, 1990a, p. 16). But Van Til goes on to make the bold statement that “no ‘fact’ is seen as it really is unless it is seen in its correct relationship to God” (Van Til, 1990a, p.16).

#### *Implications for Education*

This has implications for both public school teachers and Christian school teachers. What is learning? What is knowledge? Does all knowledge ultimately point one to God? Or are facts simply neutral bits of information that point to nothing beyond themselves?

#### *Van Til’s Presuppositionalism*

Van Til (n.d.) defends the position that he must take God as his starting point and explains why this approach is essential to his metaphysics and epistemology:

Now, in fact, I feel that the whole of history and civilization would be unintelligible to me if it were not for my belief in God. So true is this, that I propose to argue that unless God is back of everything, you cannot find meaning in anything. I cannot even argue for belief in Him, without already having taken Him for granted. And similarly I contend that you cannot argue against belief in Him unless you also first take Him for granted. Arguing about God's existence, I hold, is like arguing about air. You may affirm that air exists, and I that it does not. But as we debate the point, we are both breathing air all the time. Or to use another illustration, God is like the emplacement on which must stand the very guns that are supposed to shoot Him out of existence (p. 3).

In this way Van Til introduces his presuppositional approach to epistemology. It is a person's presuppositions that determine the types of questions one asks and the types of answers one perceives. Presuppositions determine what a fact means to a person. Van Til described one's presuppositions as colored glasses cemented to one's eyes (Van Til, 1976, p. 77) that color everything that is seen. Elsewhere he says, "Looking at the world through the 'spectacles' of God's Word, we are able to understand the world and our place in it from God's perspective" (Van Til, 1979, p. 117). For Van Til, the starting point, in education as in theology, was always the self-attesting God of scripture. (Van Til, 1976)

For Van Til, this presuppositional starting point makes all the difference in the world. The theistic worldview begins with temporal creation. Says Van Til (1990b),

Our aim is to show that Christian education is based upon the notion of creation, that this notion of creation in turn is an inseparable part of the whole theistic

philosophy of life, and that this philosophy of life is the most reasonable for man to take because all others reduce experience to something void of significance. (p. 46).

Van Til (1990b) continues,

Theism says that man is subject to the categories of space and time while God is not. Every variety of anti-theism says that space and time, if they are real, exist for God, if God is real, in the same way that they exist for man. (p. 47).

“Creation,” according to Van Til, “implies that God’s thought alone is original and absolute, while human thought is derivative and finite” (Van Til, 1990b, p. 47).

Creationism is essential to Van Til’s epistemology, but it should be noted that this is not the same creationism vehemently defended by today’s fundamentalists. Fundamentalist creationism is part of an evidentialist apologetic. In other words by adopting the rules of scientific evidence, creationists attempt to prove the truth of scripture. This is contrary the Van Tilian apologetic. The significance of the creation for Van Til is to affirm that God is not part of the creation, but creator of the entire universe and transcendent in being and knowledge.

#### *Van Til’s Epistemology*

Van Til’s theory of knowledge flows from his understanding of man (that is, man as prophet, priest, and king), his concept of antithesis (that is, a theistic worldview versus an anti-theistic worldview) and his presuppositional apologetics (that is, that one must assume the existence of a self-sufficient God). Van Til (1990b) defines his theistic epistemology:

Education is implication into God's interpretation. To think God's thoughts after him, to dedicate the universe to its Maker, and to be the vice-regent of the Ruler of all things: this is man's task. Man is prophet, priest and king. It is this view of education that is involved in and demanded by the idea of creation (p. 44).

He uses Plato, Kant, and Dewey as examples of anti-theistic theories of knowledge. "For Plato nothing is truly real unless it is eternal" (Van Til, 1990b, p. 49).

Van Til (1990b) says further,

His standard of reality is an abstract principle, a principle of thought *per se*, that is assumed to exist apart from God. God is real insofar as he can live up to his principle. The universe, at least the Ideal Universe, exists apart from God. God falls within the universe (p. 49).

Van Til contrasts Augustine with Plato to illustrate the theistic position. "For Plato the Ideas or laws are next to or higher than God; for Augustine the ideas or laws are expressive of God's nature" (Van Til, 1990b, pp. 57-58). And again, "For Augustine human thought is primarily receptive and thereupon reconstructive" (Van Til, 1990b, p. 58).

In analyzing the argument for good and bad in Plato's republic Bertrand Russell, hardly a theist himself, points out the fallacy of Plato's position. Russell (1945) says,

God determines what is good and what bad; the man whose will is in harmony with the will of God is a good man. Yet this answer is not quite orthodox.

Theologians say that God is good, and this implies that there is a standard of goodness which is independent of God's will (p. 117).

“Once abstract thought as a principle is accepted as the Umpire between God and man,” says Van Til, “God must be dependent because the Umpire must be higher than both God and man. On the basis of the Platonic assumption one cannot speak of a temporal creation. God is within the universe, and the universe to be real must be eternal” (Van Til, 1990b, p. 50).

Kant, too, receives Van Til’s critique. “According to Kant thought is *creatively constructive* (Van Til, 1990b, p. 52),” Van Til informs us. “For Kant human thought is primarily creative and therefore not created. Again creation,” as understood by Van Til, “implies that God’s thought alone is absolutely and originally creative. This original and exclusive creativity on the part of God is denied by Kant (Van Til, 1990b, p. 53).” “It is this master principle of the creativity of human thought that holds in its grip with unquestioned predominance all modern philosophy in general and all modern philosophy of education in particular” (Van Til, 1990b, p. 53).

Finally, Van Til finds this dominant theory of knowledge worked out in the educational philosophy of Dewey. “All that pragmatism has done is to work out the Platonic-Kantian assumption in a particular and perhaps most logically consistent direction” (Van Til, 1990b, p. 54). “[Dewey] rejects the Christian notion of the self-existent, transcendent God. But he also opposes the philosophical notion of transcendence given by idealists” (Van Til, 1971, p.49). So although Dewey differs from Plato in that Dewey rejects Plato’s concept of a transcendental Ideal, nevertheless, like Plato, Dewey does not acknowledge God as creator and interpreter of all that is. Further, Dewey is akin to Kant in that ultimate creativity in thought, knowledge, and experience rest with the creature rather than the creator. (Van Til, 1977, 1990b)

*Van Til and Postmodernity*

Now we are in a postmodern world. Not only are Van Til's old enemies dead but the modern movement he fought in his life has disappointed its followers and is being replaced by postmodernity. Barrett (1978) describes how people have been disillusioned with the promise of modernity:

For the past three centuries, since Descartes, we have been in the grip of a metaphysics of death that Whitehead calls "scientific materialism." We understand the phenomena of life only as an assemblage of the lifeless. The mechanical and routine are taken as the underlying reality of nature. We take the abstractions of our technical calculation to be ultimately concrete. Beneath our preoccupation with technique and apparatus there is a prevalent metaphysical disposition to see things ultimately resolved into bits of brute matter pervading space, in a flux of configurations, senseless, valueless, purposeless. (p. 7)

How does the Christian school respond to this postmodern culture? Do we assimilate or do we alienate? Can we adopt a position similar to that of Van Til in his defense of the faith against modernity? What would Van Til's response be?

*Discussion*

Certainly the Christian school movement needs to consider the motivation for its work. Although Van Til may not use this term, another author referred to that which Van Til is advocating as the "divine interest" in education. (Blake, 1992)

If Christian schools are just public schools with prayer and religion sprinkled on top then our schools may not have a distinct mission. For the Christian school teacher the implication of Van Til's ideas is that faith needs to be integrated with learning throughout



the curriculum. Religious education is not compartmentalized apart from the remaining subjects in a sacred/secular dichotomy. All learning points to God. No fact is neutral with regard to its religious content. That is, there is not a fact that does not point to the One whose word created it and sustains it. When Van Til talks about the place of religious instruction in the school curriculum he says, “To be conscious of these distinctions does not mean that we must spend much more time on the direct teaching of religion than on teaching other matters. If we teach religion indirectly, everywhere and always, we may need less time to teach religion directly” (Van Til, 1990a, p. 4).

The Bible is essential in the Christian school. He says, “We live and move and have our being in the revelation of God.” Van Til does not claim that the Bible is a science text or a math text or a reading text, but he does say that the Bible is a book that can inform our philosophy of math or science or reading.

Christian school teachers need to be scholars, who understand what they believe about the child and knowledge and learning. Further, Christians need to be consistent. If we make claims about our faith, then we need to consider the logical application of those claims and how they apply in the classroom.

On the negative side, it seemed that during his lifetime nearly no one escaped Van Til’s critique. Those with whom he debated in his writings were labeled “opponents.” Perhaps it was indicative of the time in which he wrote, but his debates were depicted as if he and his opponent were at war. The outcomes of his arguments were framed in terms of winning and losing of battles. Among those with whom he found fault were esteemed evangelicals such as Francis Schaefer and C. S. Lewis, as well as many great theologians such as Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. He felt compelled as a matter of conscience to

respond every time he felt the Word of God was being compromised. He expressed his motivation this way, “We are sorry that at this point we are conscience bound to express disagreement with these good and true men” (Van Til, 1977, p. 13). Elsewhere he envisions himself “stand[ing] before the bar of the educational philosophy of the day” (Van Til, 1990b, p. 64), as Luther stood before the Diet of Worms, overwhelmed by a powerful enemy, but unable to retract his faith.

In spite of the value and depth that one finds in his writings, one is left wondering if there is anyone with pure enough theology to escape Van Til’s critique. This author wonders whether in this diverse world there is not some way to have conversation with those of contrary positions with integrity, grace, peace and hope. One must admire his faith, intelligence, courage, and determination. Van Til did not shrink from upholding his convictions, even if they were considered foolishness to others. Perhaps this is what the apostle Paul spoke about in the passage that began this paper. If this is so, Van Til took him seriously.

#### *For Further Study*

Van Til’s theories should be pursued further. He has a large corpus of writings and recorded lectures that have been touched in the most cursory fashion in this paper. Further, the works of Plato, Kant, Dewey and others should be examined as primary sources. These philosophers and others deserve to be studied for their own value and in their own context.

Finally, the question needs to be explored as to whether Van Til has something to offer a postmodern world. This author believes that Van Til’s metaphysic recognizes a complexity in the universe that cannot be explained by modern science, a position that

makes him very relevant in a postmodern world. Furthermore, an epistemology such as Van Til's that recognizes presuppositions and faith commitments in all educational theories would in fact be very significant today.

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