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## Cornelius Van Til and Rhetorical Motive

### Introduction

This study is an early step toward defining theological apologetics as a rhetorical genre, an endeavor that blends theory and practice in a way that is suitable for my ministerial role as a professor of communication studies in a Christian liberal arts university. Apologetics for the purpose of this project references communication that is designed to justify or explicate the supernatural or the knowledge and/or experience of the supernatural. Dr. Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987)—a prominent figure in the relatively modern apologetic tradition of Christian presuppositionalism—is the focus of this analysis, which employs aspects of Burkean rhetorical analysis and speech-act theory to deduce a basis for determining what motivated this soteriologically deterministic thinker nonetheless to formulate and critique theological systems as voluminously and passionately as he did. This study is the first in a series that aspires to define, in rhetorical terms, the Christian apologetic tradition and to characterize the rhetorical genre to which they belong.

Van Til is an ironic yet interesting starting point for this project. He presented his theology, which emphasized God's sovereignty and predestination to the virtual exclusion of human agency, in terms that appear nonetheless to have been designed to effect change in the minds and hearts of those who received them. Van Til acknowledged the irony of his position in correspondence, dated March 11, 1969, addressed to his colleague and fellow Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer:

I know that my argument, however forceful and valid it may be, cannot, as such, bring men to know the truth. I know that at the beginning man was created as the image-bearer of God and as such as possessing true freedom. But I know also that this freedom of man did not consist in an ability to go beyond or independently of the all-controlling purposes of the triune God. (The Works)

One wonders upon reading this and similar statements in his writings what compelled Van Til to articulate defenses of his faith and to critique "heretical" counterpoints. When he died on April 17, 1987, he had expressed his thoughts in more than 500 such books, syllabi, editorials, articles, book reviews, and manuscripts (The Works). This study dramatically describes two notable Van Til writings and considers their illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects in an attempt to uncover his true motive for communicating apologetically.

### A Burkeian Inroad

Learning what Van Til wrote as apologia as he did, how he did, where he did, when he did is a necessary first step in a project that probes his motivation for doing so. Kenneth Burke's dramatic paradigm—which synthesizes text and context—is a useful tool for this purpose. Burke presented the rationale for a key component of his model, the pentad, in the following words: "Any complete statement about motives will offer some kinds of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (992). Accordingly, in my attempt to grasp Van Til's rhetorical motive, I have evaluated his writing not as an assortment of isolated utterances and propositional acts, but as the linguistically and culturally situated yet meaningful phenomenon that human communication inevitably is.

### Methodological Application

As previously stated, Van Til's writings were voluminous, so I searched through his writings for a representative apologetic statement that succinctly yet sufficiently represents his thinking at a mature stage of his intellectual development. Because they appear to satisfy these criteria, I decided to evaluate two of his treatises—"My Credo" and "What I Believe Today." The former, published in 1971, is the 8,000-word preface to Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til, a symposium dedicated to Van Til and his thought on his 75th birthday. The publisher

of this work, the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, describes “My Credo” as Van Til’s “basic, non-philosophical introduction to his own thought” (The Works). “What I Believe Today,” published by the Journal of Christian Reconstruction in 1982, is a 3,000-word statement that was Van Til’s last published article (The Works).

In the pages that follow, I present a dramatistic assessment of “My Credo” and “What I Believe Today.” I begin the analysis with a bifurcated description of each text as a distinct rhetorical act and conclude it with a sequenced discussion of agent, scene, agency, and purpose as these apply to both texts. At the conclusion of this section, I utilize several principles from speech-act theory to determine Van Til’s motives for writing. The substance of the study follows.

#### .Van Til’s Rhetorical Motive

##### The Act: “My Credo”

First published in 1971, Jerusalem and Athens—according to an editor’s note at the beginning of the book—was “a symposium dedicated to Van Til on his 75th birthday, and in his 40th year as professor of apologetics at WTS [Westminster Theological Seminary].” Van Til’s “My Credo” appears as the first of four major parts of the book, which is a compilation of essays, written mostly by others, about a variety of “problems and issues raised and discussed in the apologetics of Cornelius Van Til” (The Works). These included matters related to “the authority of the Scriptures, the noetic effects of the Fall, the existence of ‘common ground’ between believer and unbeliever—which have been at the forefront of theological discussion in the twentieth century, especially in evangelical circles” (The Works).

Van Til’s primary objective in “My Credo”—and perhaps in all of his apologetic writings—appears on its face to be explanation, and he indicates in this writing that although he is deterministic, he does not necessarily deny the possibility of human agency in persuasion. He communicates this and related points in this essay via a variety of rhetorical devices that imply his reliance on logic and experience as components of the divine revelation that he considered foundational to making sense of the world and the human condition.

Van Til presents his thought in four major sections, the last of which outlines the philosophy sketched in the first three. The first three sections are respectively titled “The Self-Attesting Christ of Scripture,” “Christ Writes Me A Letter,” and “Toward A Christ-Centered Apologetic.” Van Til’s language throughout the document points strongly to biblical themes. The word Christ appears 57 times and Jesus, 15 times, in the essay. The word God appears 67 times, and Holy Spirit or Spirit, 21 times. The terms Bible, Scripture, God’s Word, and Word of God appear 64 times, and the essay is sprinkled with references to biblical texts that Van Til cites to support of his various statements.

The first sentence states the premise of his essay: “The self-attesting Christ of Scripture has always been my starting point for everything I have said” (The Works). Furthermore,

As a Christian I believe first of all in the testimony that Jesus gives of himself and his work . . . I have by his Spirit learned to understand something of what Jesus meant when he said: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life . . . I understand no fact aright unless I see it in its proper relation to Christ as Creator-Redeemer of me and my world. (The Works)

After establishing this axiom, Van Til addresses its antitheses. He portrays self-determination—manifested, for example, in subjecting biblical authority to the authority of fallen, finite perceptive faculties—as rebellion against the biblically-ordered Christocentricity (versus egocentricity) without which true knowledge is impossible, and he notes that the rebellion showed itself in Eden when Adam essentially said:

I must first decide whether such a God as often speaks to us (1) knows what the “good” for us is, (2) controls history so that he can determine what will happen if we disobey him, and (3) has the right to demand obedience from us. After I decide these issues, and if the answer is “yes,” then I shall obey him. Certainly not before. (The Works)

He strongly emphasizes the agency of the Holy Spirit in revelation, noting that humans are incapable of understanding even Biblical truths without this divinely initiated guidance from without (The Works).

One of Van Til’s major objectives in this essay is to demonstrate that Christian theology and apologetics, largely because of the aforementioned factors, are necessarily grounded in Biblical revelation

and must not be polluted by methodologies that fallaciously presume human autonomy and the centrality of the self in the investigative process. He then—and again in the essay’s next section—refers to Biblical and historical examples of Christians who retained truthful methodologies, even in alien contexts, including Paul, Tertullian, Augustine, and John Calvin. Van Til then assails attempts to morph Biblical authority with subjectivism, mentioning Karl Barth’s Neo-orthodoxy in particular:

The emphasis, therefore, on human autonomy in non-Reformed evangelical theology not only plays havoc with the scriptural message of salvation by grace alone, but distorts the doctrine of Scripture itself by finding the ultimate exegetical tool in the subjective experience of human freedom and by denying to Scripture and the Holy Spirit the power, authority, and necessity of invading the souls of men. (The Works)

In the essay’s third section, Van Til explains that he became an apologist because he was appalled that even Reformed apologists—he names theologians Warfield and Greene—were turning to rationalism and other schemes that, as Van Til puts it, call into question the authority of the “self-attesting Christ” (The Works). He lauds Reformation-era theologian John Calvin for having “explicated the person of Christ solely in scriptural terms, i.e., his method is exegetical rather than speculative,” and notes that “to find out what man is and who God is, one can only go to Scripture” (The Works). Van Til concludes this section by countering two objections to presuppositionalism raised by a critic named Hackett.

“My Credo’s” style is thoroughly discursive, but it includes passages where the primacy of axiomatic principles gives way to autobiographical passion. This shows in a passage at the conclusion of the essay’s first section which indicates that Van Til regarded himself to be a man on a spiritual crusade, not unlike Martin Luther and the Reformers to whom he refers in his essay’s third section:

All of my life, my life in my family, my life in my church, my life in society, and my life in my vocation as a minister of the gospel and a teacher of Christian apologetics is unified under the banner Pro Rege! I am not a hero, but in Christ I am not afraid of what man may do to me. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the ongoing march of victory of the Christ to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given. (The Works)

The essay is not entirely polemical. Its first statement, for example, is obviously more sentimental than apologetic: “I hope that by this, ‘My Credo,’ I have been able in a small way sincerely to thank all those who took the time to write for this birthday-book” (The Works). Van Til’s sentimentality resurfaces in the essay’s concluding remark: “How can I express my appreciation adequately for the honor you have conferred on me by your contributions to this Festschrift?” (The Works). Perhaps he did not realize it, but these deliberate insertions of the self into his discourse disclose something significant about Van Til’s motivation for writing—a point that will be further developed later in this article.

#### The Act: “What I Believe Today”

Van Til’s last published article, “What I Believe Today,” resembles “My Credo” in several respects, not the least of which is structurally. About half the length of the earlier work, the former, as the latter, presumes to present Van Til’s most basic beliefs in the form of logically articulated and sequenced, proof-texted propositions. He begins this writing by stating his belief in Romans 5:8-11, which he quotes in its entirety. He supplements the passage’s Christological emphasis with a statement about God’s triunity from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Van Til then cites supportive Trinitarian statements from John Calvin and B.B. Warfield in a paragraph that leads to the following premise: “The triune God of Scripture is, then, alone ultimate, self-sufficient and self-referential. No man can say anything intelligible about anything except on the assumption that such is the case” (The Works).

As in “My Credo,” Van Til supplements his introductory premise with a statement of its antitheses, referencing Socrates, Descartes, and Kant as examples of thinkers who shared the common misperception that “man is the final point of reference in reaction to anything” (The Works). Then he restates and further develops his thesis:

Thus there are two mutually exclusive points of view with respect to man and the world about him. Christians are Christians because they believe in the triune God of Scripture as the final reference point of human speech and action; the non-Christians are non-

Christians because they believe in man as the final reference point in all significant human speech and action. (The Works)

Van Til proceeds to state another foundational belief—God’s foreordination of everything except sin—a tenet he supports with statements from the Westminster catechisms. Noticeably absent in his treatment of this topic are references to biblical prooftexts, perhaps an intentional omission because the catechisms themselves include these. Rather, Van Til summarily states, “So far we have the Triune God of Scripture by his decree ordaining whatsoever comes to pass. This is, in a nutshell, my philosophy of history” (The Works).

Van Til then catalogues objections that “non-Christians” raise to the points he has stated, in a paragraph that leads to yet another restatement of his premise that Christians and non-Christians have “have mutually exclusive beliefs about everything” (The Works). He proceeds with the use of Biblical imagery to discuss the Christian’s motive for warning others to embrace the faith:

I tell my contemporaries that Christ has instructed me to warn them of impending judgment. My reasoning with them is identical with my witnessing to them. If they do not repent and turn for the forgiveness of their rebellion against him who calls them to himself, they will ere long call upon the mountains to cover them from the wrath of the Lamb. (The Works)

At this point of the treatise, Van Til introduces a fictional character named Mr. Jones, whom he presents as subscribing to the non-Christian perspective. Van Til explains that Mr. Jones cannot know truth because he assumes (a) “the idea of the self-sufficiency of man as the final reference point for all human speech and action,” (b) “the idea of pure contingency or chance as a principle of individualization of all reality and” (c) “the idea of pure or abstract being as a principle of unity” (The Works). Mr. Jones’s lack of a spiritually regenerate perspective, as manifested in these specific propositions, leads to a predictable disconnect: “He will ask me how I can expect him to appeal with me to facts and to logic, when what I really want him to do is to accept the nature of fact and logic to be what they are in terms of my authoritarian deterministic philosophy of history.” (The Works)

Van Til develops this theme by presenting spiritual regeneration as a precondition to one’s attainment of a proper understanding of both logic and facts and the knowledge that they combine to generate. However, he notes, something stands in the way of conversion. “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the spirit is life and peace, because the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (The Works). He concludes his treatise by appealing to the example of Jesus, who according to Van Til claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) without justifying the claim with logic or facts. To Van Til, evangelistic appeals require no justification; they need only proclaim the fact of man’s need of redemption. Ironically, his final statement exudes a passion that is more than merely factual: “I have been washed from my sin by the blood of Him who gave Himself to the death of the cross and sent His Holy Spirit who gave me new birth. May this soon be true also for you and your family” (The Works). The presence of the ego in this statement raises a question about Van Til’s rhetorical motive that is addressed later in this paper.

#### The Agent

To understand Van Til’s rhetorical acts, one must know something about the experiences that formed the rhetor. Born in the Netherlands a half-decade before Abraham Kuyper’s 1901 assent to the nation’s political helm, Van Til developed an interest in farming, mainly after his family emigrated to rural Indiana when he was 10. “Study was not easy for me,” he later confessed in an interview. “Having grown up on the farm I was used to weeding onions and carrots and cabbages. It was hard to adjust to classroom work; I had labored physically and my body was aching for that” (“At the Beginning, God” 20).

As it turned out, however, Van Til pursued a formal education extensively. After graduating from Calvin College, he received advanced degrees from Princeton Seminary and Princeton University. Van Til taught at Princeton for a year before departing the increasingly modernistic school with fellow theological conservatives to co-found Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1929. He later recalled lamenting that prestigious “Princeton has been reduced to rubbish by that hurricane called

Karl Barth” (The Works).

Van Til served as Westminster’s professor of Christian apologetics from 1929-1972. It was during this time that he authored most of the 500-plus works referenced earlier in this study. Meanwhile, he received an honorary professorship at the University of Debrecen, Hungary, a D.D. from Reformed Episcopal Seminary in Philadelphia, and a Th.D. from the University of Potchefstroom, South Africa (“Cornelius Van Til” 36).

Van Til was a rich text whose qualities went far beyond his writings. T. Grady Spire, who once sat under Van Til’s instruction, recalls him as a professor who was at once brilliant and passionate about ideas:

Every student of Van Til can instantly recall the characteristic Van Tillian blackboard graffiti: the foremost symbol being two circles, a big one for the creator, the other for creation with no ontological bridge between. The entire history of philosophy or Christian thought, including most heresy, would be strewn in names and phrases across the board. He scrawled Latin, Greek, German, Dutch wherever there was room. By the time he finished lecturing his hands, his clothes, and even his face would be chalk-smudged. (“At the Beginning, God” 20)

Another former student, John Frame, recalls Van Til as a “gracious and charming” person who sometimes had a “wild sense of humor.” Van Til “sometimes threw chalk at students whom he perceived to be naughty for one reason or another.” Frame adds, “I recall sitting in a car with Van Til and some other people, listening to him do a hilarious impression of Frank Fontaine’s ‘Crazy Guggenheim’ from The Jackie Gleason Show” (Frame 27).

Spire observes that Van Til stood boldly for his supernaturalistic paradigm even in hostile settings where his ideas were dismissed before being heard. “I recall his debating liberal and neo-orthodox champions at Boston University. He graciously, respectfully, but incisively told them that they were going to hell” (“At the Beginning, God” 20). A presuppositionalist indeed!

Van Til’s presuppositionalism related directly to his belief in a principle once articulated by Kuyper in the following words: “There is not one inch of life about which Christ does not say, ‘It is mine.’” (“Cornelius Van Til” 37). As Van Til saw things, this principle was as true of philosophy and methodology as it was of theory. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy differ in their conclusions because they part ways at the most basic level, Van Til contended. “There are two ways of defending the faith,” he once explained. “One of these begins from man as self-sufficient and works up to God, while the other begins from the triune God of the Scriptures and relates all things to him” (“At the Beginning, God” 19-20).

Van Til utilized the latter approach to stake a methodological claim that has generated a significant following among Reformed Protestants. His ideas are criticized by Christian and non-Christian alike, for various reasons. The editor of Jerusalem and Athens discloses that Van Til’s philosophy won little applause from academicians, probably because it attacked their views where they are most vulnerable—at the axiomatic level:

Prof. Van Til’s writings, with their depth and logical rigor as well as prophetic urgency, have not won him many allies. In this ecumenical age he is disturbingly but intentionally out of place. To maintain that the Christian must continue, and that the non-Christian must begin, to bring every thought into obedience to the biblical Christ is, in this pluralistic age, déclassé. His warnings against the church’s parasitic existence on the wisdom of the world divide his readers into equally adamant friends and foes. His writings drive “hard bargains” in the day of the “wheeler-dealer” and the precedence of a pragmatic theory of action over any and all theories of truth. (The Works)

Van Til had a reason for being wary toward dialogue with his critics, particularly those who denied the faith. “The traditional ideas of trying to find some neutral common ground on which the believer and unbeliever can stand are based on the notion that man is autonomous,” he once explained. “No one can prove anything when there is nothing from which to begin. To have faith in faith is blind faith. It is meaningless. It is wicked, because, as Paul says, all men, knowing God, hold down this knowledge in unrighteousness” (“At the Beginning, God” 21).

Van Til believed this spiritual dichotomy wielded implications for the Christian who would attempt to be persuasive, particularly in the presentation of redemptive truths.

I must be all things to all men, but I establish men in their way unto death if I do not say to them, on the authority of Christ, that only if they repent of their sin will they have eternal life in him. Is this blind faith? On the contrary, it is the only basis man has on which he can stand, to know himself, to find the facts of his world and learn how to relate them to one another. (“At the Beginning, God” 21)

### The Agency and the Scene

Van Til taught apologetics in the classroom for more than half a century, periodically debated it with fellow scholars, and wrote extensively about it, a point supported to the vast collection of texts that he left behind (The Works). As established in previous content, he spoke in both hostile and friendly settings and addressed both adversarial and sympathetic audiences. We know this based on the records he left behind.

One’s analysis of a rhetor like Van Til is necessarily limited to the remaining record of his life. Van Til’s remaining record is vast. As indicated earlier, it includes hundreds of individual texts, the vast majority of which are verbal in either printed or electronic form. But Van Til’s record is merely that—a record—a collection of communications in mediated forms that limit the scholar’s quest for a thorough analysis of each as a rhetorical act. The critic can evaluate the agency and scene of his rhetorical acts by referring only to what is available—and what is available includes the exemplary manuscripts described in the preceding sections.

Van Til may have had many reasons for expressing his thoughts in published form through such writings as “My Credo” and “What I Believe Today.” Although his words about the merits of the printed page are either undiscovered or non-existent, one may reasonably suppose that a twentieth century scholar like Van Til—who trained and practiced in the modern academy—published his work in an attempt to satisfy the expectations of modern scholarly culture. Van Til seems to have recognized that the academic publication is the lifeblood of the academic community. Without it, a discipline lacks the forum that most efficiently fosters the widespread and enduring contemplation of ideas and the criticisms they engender. Van Til seems to have recognized this. He approvingly referenced the rationale that gives rise to scholarly publications very early stage of his academic career in an editorial that appeared in Calvin College’s Chimes magazine:

May we then have no convictions; may we never take a stand? Would we advocate a fake, would-be scholarly attitude of which indecision and doubt are the prime characteristics? Not in the least. We can scarcely help having at least tentative convictions about questions at issue. Our entire psychological constitution compels us early to have certain tentative convictions, and to find logical reasons to bolster them up . . . Tentative convictions do not block the way for intellectual and moral progress as do permanent convictions. Tentative convictions do not rob us of the great gain we may derive from controversies as do permanent convictions. Permanent convictions among students must be destroyed. (The Works)

This statement, when considered in the light of his other statements, communicates an important point about Van Til’s attitude toward his own academic writings. Although he surely valued what he expressed in print—why else would he have published?—he would not have attributed to his printed words the authority that belongs to the Biblical autographa that inspired his apologetic writing. As he explained in his book An Introduction to Systematic Theology (1949),

(a) the human subject was created by God so that it could, by virtue of that fact, be and originally was the perfect medium of the revelation of God; (b) even after the entrance of sin, the human subject remained metaphysically accessible to God so that God could, by virtue of that fact, insert an area of perfect interpretation into the world of false interpretation; (c) God actually did insert such an infallible interpretation, or there would be no true interpretation at all; (d) we are actually crossing the river of life on this bridge of infallible interpretation, even though it be covered (1) objectively, by the loss of the

autographa and (2) subjectively, by the inability of any sinner to interpret the truth perfectly to himself.

This framework clearly demonstrates that Van Til believed that human language—including his own—is limited in its ability to communicate truth to the fallen human mind. He believed that God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, can surmount the imperfections of human thought and language to bring about an understanding of redemptive truths that otherwise defy human perception. Thus, he expressed in print statements that on their face had limited persuasive value. True understanding, he believed, results not from the crafty development of truthful propositions, but from the application of the propositions to the human heart by the One who can elucidate them to otherwise blinded human minds.

#### The Purpose

This element of Burke's pentad is the focus of this final section of the study—the motive of the rhetorical act. What prompted Van Til to write apologetically? An answer to this question requires an evaluation of the plain meaning of his words as well as a consideration of his motivation for using them as he did, a contextual analysis well served by basic categorical components of speech-action theory.

To understand what motivated Van Til to say what he said, one must probe for his intentions not merely in the *prima facie* meaning of his words, but in his specific acts of expressing them as he did. J.L. Austin explained the significance of such an approach to interpretation: "Once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" (139). To promote an act-centered approach to linguistic analysis, Austin schematized human statements into four primary categories—an utterance act, a propositional act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. The utterance, concisely defined by Littlejohn, is the "pronunciation of the words," the proposition is the belief that "something you are saying is true," the illocution is the "design to fulfill an intention," and the perlocution is the design to have an actual effect on the other person's behavior" (78). As stated earlier in this paper, the speech-action categories of focus in this project are illocution and perlocution, which are sequentially considered in the paragraphs that follow.

Cornelius Van Til—Reformed Protestant Christian apologist and author of "My Credo" and "What I Believe Today"—wrote these works for several reasons. I submit that he did so primarily to order his own existence by making sense of the world in which he lived—a motive he satisfied by renewing vision and fostering community among those who came to share his view of the world.

Van Til made sense of his world in his composition of these writings by deriving a unified, purposeful account of human existence from his rationally and empirically informed observations. Whatever else he may have said through his individual words, clauses, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, he communicated, through his use of them his belief in the value and validity of the rules of reason and observation that their meaningful use implies. One's use of verbal constructs to distinguish concepts from one another implies his/her assent to such fundamental principles of reason as the laws of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle, without which the verbal constructs could have no meaning. One's use of verbal constructs to reference empirical realities, furthermore, implies his/her belief in the empirical realities that he/she purports to symbolize through his/her use of them. When Van Til in "My Credo" sentimentally referenced "the honor you have conferred on me," he assumed that the word "you" referenced people whose existence and qualities he had come to know through rationalized empirical observations.

Besides rationally and empirically informed observations, Van Til made sense of his world by appealing to revelation in many forms, the divine form being one of the most obvious in his writing. The previous descriptions of "My Credo" and "What I Believe Today" reference the pervasiveness in these writings of Biblical passages, teachings, verses, and terms that, as Van Til saw things, were foundational to his belief structure. His appeals to historical writings and accounts of historical personalities who he could not have known (e.g., Calvin) imply, furthermore, that Van Til assumed the validity of other revelatory sources.

Referring to each of these epistemic faculties, Van Til formulated a philosophy of human existence that meaningfully ordered his world. Although by no means a subjectivist, he often expressed this philosophy in terms of its relation to himself. Consider the following excerpt from “My Credo”:

I have learned something of what it means to make my every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, being converted anew every day to the realization that I understand no fact aright unless I see it in its proper relation to Christ as Creator-Redeemer of me and my world. I seek his kingdom and its righteousness above all things else. I now know by the testimony of his Spirit with my spirit that my labor is not in vain in the Lord. (The Works)

Van Til realized the meaningful ordering of his world not merely by filling his head with truthful information, but by communicating his philosophy of human existence to others. His lengthy career as a prolific apologist, educator, and writer certainly bears testament to this. Still, his writings were sometimes motivated by more specific concerns. His composition of “My Credo” was apparently motivated in part by a sense of gratitude toward the colleagues who had honored him with the symposium of which it was part. “What I Believe Now” was evidently motivated by a concern for renewing vision and fostering community among the largely sympathetic readership of The Journal of Christian Reconstruction. Van Til’s awareness of his revered reputation among the anticipated readers of either of these articles likely contributed a strong degree of ethos to the motivational mix.

### Conclusion

This study utilized aspects of Burkean rhetorical analysis and speech-act theory to deduce a basis for formulating what motivated Cornelius Van Til, a deterministic thinker, nonetheless to write apologetically as he did in two notable writings—“My Creed” and “What I Believe Today.” Using pentadic description, it reviewed these writings as distinct rhetorical acts exercised by a rhetorical agent (Van Til) who communicated what he did in published form for the purpose of satisfying several motivations. Van Til wrote these works and others primarily to order his own existence by making sense of the world in which he lived, a task he exercised by appealing to rationally, empirically, and revelationally informed observations. He expressed this ordering of existence in “My Credo” and “What I Believe Today” and did so for a variety of reasons, including his motive to renew vision and foster community among those who had corroborated his ordering of existence by adopting it as their own.

Although the present study is but the first of many that will inform my rhetorical appraisal of apologetics as a distinct rhetorical genre, it affords several tentative conclusions about Van Til’s apologetic that could be reasonably applied to apologetics in general.

1. Apologetic texts are historical and cultural artifacts that must be interpreted in relation to the forces that fashioned them. Such texts can mean precious little to those who attempt to understand them apart from the forces that brought them into being and that fashioned their form. Burke’s pentad is a useful tool for evaluating apologetic texts in the light of their context. Its use in this study, for example, disclosed that Van Til’s apologetic was influenced by the Dutch Reformed tradition into which he was born, by his role in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy at Princeton, and by various protocols of the academic culture of his time.
2. Apologetic texts are supernaturally oriented. They presume to justify or explicate the supernatural or the knowledge and/or experience of the supernatural and to do so, whether literally, symbolically, or analogously, in terms that their creators assume to be meaningful or potentially meaningful. Van Til’s apologetic does so by insisting that the temporal can make sense only in the axiomatic light of the ostensibly eternal. He points to God himself as the one who can effect a genuine understanding of supernal truths.
3. Apologetic texts presume explicate the largely inexplicable. Van Til wrote at length about a God who, by the apologist’s own admission, transcended the constrictions of human language. He believed, nonetheless, that he could write meaningfully about God and that God himself, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, could impart meaning to his listeners’ hearts and minds despite the limitations of language in general and his own language in particular.

4. Apologetic texts are implicitly rationalistic. The apologist's utilization of language in his/her formulations and/or communications of specific theological points implies his or her assent to such fundamental principles of reasoning as the laws of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle, apart from which language could have no meaning. Elements of speech-action theory serve to support this point. If Van Til's apologetic speech disparaged the rule of reason—he did—his utilization of reason to formulate and utter a case against the rule of reason suggests that he, in fact, assumed and practiced the rule of reason.

The present study raises questions for evaluation in future research. The observations of this study are based on two relatively small documents that Van Til penned later in life. A review of his writings from different periods of Van Til's life might disclose alternative motivations for his apologetic writing, or else corroborate the conclusions I have reached in this study. A study that compares Van Til with other presuppositionalists or apologists in general, furthermore, would further promote the overarching aim of defining the rhetorical distinctives of apologetic communication.

## Appendix

## Outline of the Van Til Apologetic (taken from "My Credo")

## A. My problems with the "traditional method."

1. This method compromises God himself by maintaining that his existence is only "possible" albeit "highly probable," rather than ontologically and "rationally" necessary.
2. It compromises the counsel of God by not understanding it as the only all-inclusive, ultimate "cause" of whatsoever comes to pass.
3. It compromises the revelation of God by:
  - a. Compromising its necessity. It does so by not recognizing that even in Paradise man had to interpret the general (natural) revelation of God in terms of the covenantal obligations placed upon him by God through special revelation. Natural revelation, on the traditional view, can be understood "on its own."
  - b. Compromising its clarity. Both the general and special revelation of God are said to be unclear to the point that man may say only that God's existence is "probable."
  - c. Compromising its sufficiency. It does this by allowing for an ultimate realm of "chance" out of which might come "facts" such as are wholly new for God and for man. Such "facts" would be uninterpreted and unexplainable in terms of the general or special revelation of God.
  - d. Compromising its authority. On the traditional position the Word of God's self-attesting characteristic, and therewith its authority, is secondary to the authority of reason and experience. The Scriptures do not identify themselves, man identifies them and recognizes their "authority" only in terms of his own authority.
4. It compromises man's creation as the image of God by thinking of man's creation and knowledge as independent of the Being and knowledge of God. On the traditional approach man need not "think God's thoughts after him."
5. It compromises man's covenantal relationship with God by not understanding Adam's representative action as absolutely determinative of the future.
6. It compromises the sinfulness of mankind resulting from the sin of Adam by not understanding man's ethical depravity as extending to the whole of his life, even to his thoughts and attitudes.
7. It compromises the grace of God by not understanding it as the necessary prerequisite for "renewal unto knowledge." On the traditional view man can and must renew himself unto knowledge by the "right use of reason."

## B. My understanding of the relationship between Christian and non-Christian, philosophically speaking.

1. Both have presuppositions about the nature of reality:
  - a. The Christian presupposes the triune God and his redemptive plan for the universe as set forth once for all in Scripture.
  - b. The non-Christian presupposes a dialectic between "chance" and "regularity," the former accounting for the origin of matter and life, the latter accounting for the current success of the scientific enterprise.
2. Neither can, as finite beings, by means of logic as such, say what reality must be or cannot be.
  - a. The Christian, therefore, attempts to understand his world through the observation and logical ordering of facts in self-conscious subjection to the plan of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. b. The non-Christian, while attempting an enterprise similar to the Christian's, attempts nevertheless to use "logic" to destroy the Christian position. On the one hand, appealing to the non-rationality of "matter," he says that the chance-character of "facts" is conclusive evidence against the Christian position. Then, on the other hand, he maintains like Parmenides that the Christian story cannot possibly be true. Man must be autonomous, "logic" must be legislative as to the field of "possibility" and possibility must be above God.
3. Both claim that their position is "in accordance with the facts."

- a. The Christian claims this because he interprets the facts and his experience in the light of the revelation of the self-attesting Christ in Scripture. Both the uniformity and the diversity of facts have at their foundation the all-embracing plan of God.
  - b. The non-Christian claims this because he interprets the facts and his experience in the light of the autonomy of human personality, the ultimate “givenness” of the world and the amenability of matter to mind. There can be no fact that denies man’s autonomy or attests to the world’s and man’s divine origin.
4. Both claim that their position is “rational.”
- a. The Christian does so by claiming not only that his position is self-consistent but that he can explain both the seemingly “inexplicable” amenability of fact to logic and the necessity and usefulness of rationality itself in terms of Scripture.
  - b. The non-Christian may or may not make this same claim. If he does, the Christian maintains that he cannot make it good. If the non-Christian attempts to account for the amenability of fact to logic in terms of the ultimate rationality of the cosmos, then he will be crippled when it comes to explaining the “evolution” of men and things. If he attempts to do so in terms of pure “chance” and ultimate “irrationality” as being the well out of which both rational man and a rationally amenable world sprang, then we shall point out that such an explanation is in fact no explanation at all and that it destroys predication.
- C. My proposal, therefore, for a consistently Christian methodology of apologetics is this:
1. That we use the same principle in apologetics that we use in theology: the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture.
  2. That we no longer make an appeal to “common notions” which Christian and non-Christian agree on, but to the “common ground” which they actually have because man and his world are what Scripture says they are.
  3. That we appeal to man as man, God’s image. We do so only if we set the non-Christian principle of the rational autonomy of man against the Christian principle of the dependence of man’s knowledge on God’s knowledge as revealed in the person and by the Spirit of Christ.
  4. That we claim, therefore, that Christianity alone is reasonable for men to hold. It is wholly irrational to hold any other position than that of Christianity. Christianity alone does not slay reason on the altar of “chance.”
  5. That we argue, therefore, by “presupposition.” The Christian, as did Tertullian, must contest the very principles of his opponent’s position. The only “proof” of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of “proving” anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of “proof” itself.
  6. That we preach with the understanding that the acceptance of the Christ of Scripture by sinners who, being alienated from God, seek to flee his face, comes about when the Holy Spirit, in the presence of inescapably clear evidence, opens their eyes so that they see things as they truly are.
  7. That we present the message and evidence for the Christian position as clearly as possible, knowing that because man is what the Christian says he is, the non-Christian will be able to understand in an intellectual sense the issues involved. In so doing, we shall, to a large extent, be telling him what he “already knows” but seeks to suppress. This “reminding” process provides a fertile ground for the Holy Spirit, who in sovereign grace may grant the non-Christian repentance so that he may know him who is life eternal. (The Works)

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