

# COMPARING LEWIS AND VAN TIL

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will present a summary view and a comparison analysis between the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til and that of Clives Staples Lewis. The approaches of apologetic method with regard to the reason and noetic degradation of man will be reviewed along with the issue of what common ground exists between believers and unbelievers if any and how evidences may or may not come to bear in potential dialogue. The values and similarities along with contrasting viewpoints will be discussed as well as what may be the most effective apologetic method in addressing this particular contemporary generation.

## I. TWO VIEWS SUMMARIZED

### CORNELIUS VAN TIL

Cornelius Van Til is a proponent of a certain type of presuppositionalism that holds to a premise that Christianity cannot be defended with an unbeliever because of the lack of common ground as a result of the noetic effects of sin on the ability of mankind to reason toward conclusions of a spiritual nature. The total depravity of humankind prevents unbelievers from grasping truth. His basic premise is that “all is yellow to the jaundice eye” because the unbeliever has colored glasses cemented to his eyes, glasses which he cannot remove.<sup>1</sup> All of the arguments from believers as a result of a defense of the faith are then seen through the spectacles of this unbelief and will therefore be perverted and colored by the fallen presuppositions of the unbeliever. This position seems to border on defeatism saying that there is no sense in presenting data with regard to the faith because this data, no matter how convincing or well presented, will fall on deaf (dead) ears.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, “The Defense of the Faith,” (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), page 77

The unbeliever then is perceived as one who has nothing in common with the believer and is incapable of reasoning toward an understanding of God. He is irrational in his thinking.

Van Til perceives an unbridgeable gap between Christian and Secular rationality. The result is that Christian rationality seems irrational to the unbeliever and there is then no common point of reasoning together. According to John Frame, Van Til would walk into his classroom and “draw two circles on the chalkboard, one under the other, connected by vertical lines of ‘communication.’ The larger upper circle represented God, the smaller lower circle represented the creation. All non-Christian thought, he argued, is ‘one-circle’ thought. It either raises man to God’s level or lowers God to man’s.”<sup>2</sup> The apparent idolatrous nature of such a position as he saw it simply does not merit rationalization with unbelievers because no common ground is held.

Van Til saw the knowledge of God and the world around mankind as intimately connected and inseparable. He saw from scripture that man is made in the image of God, has an innate awareness of His existence and that this is so inherent that knowledge of Him is inescapable. God created man to respond to Him and is Himself very close to every person (Acts 17:27). All unbelievers actually at heart know God but suppress this truth which is already present (Romans 1:18). Therefore what is necessary is not convincing, but conversion. What is referred to as unbelief is not primarily an intellectual problem but involves some kind of failure such as might be found in any failed relationship.<sup>3</sup> Fallen men made for a relationship with God then already know God at some level of consciousness but are in denial of that consciousness. This is revealed for example when the professed atheist prays. As such, a man does not need proof but needs to be commended to the Savior. Since the unbeliever then knows God at some level, the hope, prayer

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, “Apologetics to the Glory of God,” (Phillipsburg, New Jersey; P&R Publishing, 1994), page 43

<sup>3</sup> S. Joel Garver “A Primer on Presuppositionalism,” , June 1997. URL# <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/phil/presupposition.htm>

and aim is that the Holy Spirit would use the words of the believer to bring the heart of the unbeliever to rest in the promises of Christ. Such is the transcendental strategy of Van Til.<sup>4</sup>

This method presupposes that knowledge of God is only possible because God exists. There is no such thing as meaning without God the Creator who stands behind all that exists. God therefore exists because without Him it would not be possible to reason or to think.<sup>5</sup> We therefore cannot use lesser arguments to first prove that God exists as a First Cause or Immovable Mover because such arguments make Him less than He is, less than the God of biblical revelation. Anything less than the Creator Redeemer God of biblical revelation is not God but is an idolatrous notion promoting a false god.

Van Til looks at lesser arguments for basic theism as insinuations to an autonomy in man and his ability to reason toward God on his own. Such an allowance makes man the ultimate reference point in understanding reality, in reasoning about life. Man's own conception and the biblical conception of both himself and God are at eternal odds with one another. To allow man to be the reference point for understanding reality about himself or about God, by allowing for rationalization about theism instead of simply calling him to the Savior, is not addressing the need of the man and is in fact short-circuiting mans true need. The essential goal in this light then is to seek a point of contact for the gospel with the natural man. This is mans true need and the only viable apologetic method which runs straight to the heart of the issue.

### **CLIVES STAPLES LEWIS**

C.S. Lewis was a cumulative case evidentialist who made his case for presenting theism from many sources in order to reason with men first toward an acknowledgement of God and then

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<sup>4</sup> Garver, page 4

<sup>5</sup> John M. Frame, "Apologetics to the Glory of God," page 70

toward a relationship with Him. Lewis for example would point out a case for God in an inherent sense of morality in the heart of all men but would also point to evidences in the created universe as indicators of Gods existence. He would even state a case for a *sense of story* in history which may supercede science; stating that there was actually only one story of man as revealed in the Bible and that all others stories could find their true roots only there. He therefore would make a case for the mythological in his aim to reveal that a common thread in the heart of man has always dreamt about and grasped for higher truths that are known to exist somewhere. This represents man reaching out for God in a form of reasoning toward Him.

The mantra of Lewis in his appeal to all men would be “go to the data” because the available data represents a convincing argument for the existence of God. He would then appear to leave the evidence to speak for itself regarding the need for further pursuit of the one true God. Having made a cumulative case for theistic belief, there would then be an assumption that the individual having now believed in a single God Creator, would then be closer to that one true God and presumably move increasingly toward Him. For those who did not see their need to move toward Him, he would leave them at that point, seeing no point in helping them repent since they saw no need of repentance and therefore turning toward God.<sup>6</sup> He maintained that the supernatural (including a concept of God) is something which man has simply forgotten<sup>7</sup> and that a kind of universal rationality exists in man which may bring a sense of the reality of the supernatural (and thus God) back into focus. Lewis in his cumulative case evidentialism saw all men as rationally capable of figuring out the reality of God and then taking steps to respond to that rationality in order to grow closer to God.

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<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity,” (New York; Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992), page 24

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Miracles,” (San Fransisco; Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), page 64

A major component of Lewis' apologetic involved the issue of morals in the heart of every person as a reflection of an absolute morality and thus an absolute Moral Giver. His argument would progress something like the following. When the behaviors of some men are not pleasing to other men then those displeased persons are automatically appealing to some kind of standard of behavior of which they expect others to be aware.<sup>8</sup> There is then postulated an inborn sense with each human being that there is a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things. These right and wrong ways reflect an inherent sense that there is a standard of which all men are aware and by which all could then measure themselves against. If there is then this one single universal standard by which to determine right and wrong then there must also be a Standard Giver behind this absolute standard. The importance of this argument would be more valuable than data regarding a created universe by a one true God because evidence in the created universe is outside of us but the universal sense of morality is evidence *within us*. This rational argument from morality therefore represents "inside information"<sup>9</sup> portraying the rationality of God to all men. Lewis appealed then to the reason of man and determined that mankind is capable of receiving data and making sound deductions by means of the intellectual equipment provided to him by his Maker. Although he would point to various evidences such as listed above as notes to a poem (evidence of God) he would beyond that point to Christianity as the poem itself and therefore the ultimate court of appeal.<sup>10</sup>

## **II. SIMILARITIES AND CRITIQUES**

Both Lewis and Van Til place God's Word at a higher level than other data available to the human reason. Van Til in his presuppositionalism is actually maintaining, according to John Frame, that his position is more like pre-eminent suppositionalism in a transcendental framework

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<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity," page 3

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, "Mere Christianity," page 23

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, "Miracles," page 212

of foundational essentials.<sup>11</sup> The data of scripture then is not so much the *only* data but is certainly the *most important* data with Van Til, the pre-eminent data. Lewis would not disagree with this. Although Van Til does not abandon rational arguments and evidences<sup>12</sup> what he does reject is the idea of neutral or autonomous reasoning. Lewis does not venture this far. He does admit to the fallible senses of mankind<sup>13</sup> but also makes a case for the validity of autonomous reason since “unless human reason is valid no science can be true.”<sup>14</sup> He does qualify this however. He states that the reason of man is subject to the power of God in all respects stating that “When you are arguing against Him you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all.”<sup>15</sup> Van Til would presumably not disagree with this assessment of man.

Both men articulated what they would say is mankind’s hidden awareness of God. Van Til stated that although some reject the knowledge of God they yet possess it in a suppressed form<sup>16</sup> and must therefore be addressed with the simple gospel message in order to uncover that latent knowledge. Lewis would say that men have simply forgotten the supernatural and stand in need of having that informational truth coaxed out of them by addressing aspects of theism evidenced in the world around them and revealed by yearnings within. Lewis would coax man into hearing the ring of truth about God inherent in all creation. Although both men in their apologetic methods place strict limits on the reasoning power of man and both men place emphasis on the ultimate truth of scripture and allude at least to a common hidden awareness of a knowledge of God in men, their similarities end at these points.

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<sup>11</sup> Frame, page 13

<sup>12</sup> IBID., page 229

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, “Miracles,” page 1

<sup>14</sup> IBID., page 21

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, “Mere Christianity,” page 38

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Van Til, “The Defense of the Faith,” page 101

Lewis would, as a classical evidentialist, ultimately picture Christian rationality as a circle within a larger circle of the common secular rationality of all men. Van Til on the other hand would completely segregate the rationality of the Christian and the Secular with two distinct circles. The critique of Van Til then regarding Lewis is worth mentioning. He states that Lewis does not send out a clear call for men to turn from their own ways and follow the God of the Bible, but asks men to “dress up as Christ” in order to turn into something like Him.<sup>17</sup> With this he places Lewis in the same camp as the Romanists, Aquinas and secular philosophers, merely seeking to lead men into becoming better kinds of men. This critique has merit. Lewis never seemed to actually articulated a doctrine of justification by faith alone and seemed also to present a transformational model of salvation where an individual is merely moving toward heaven or toward hell at any one time. This would be theologically problematic for most evangelical or reformed believers today. He also, by the natural progression of his belief system as far as it was established, thought that people in other religions could actually belong to Christ without knowing it.<sup>18</sup> It is not difficult to see this particular position as anti-apologetic.

With regard to the apologetic method of C. S. Lewis, Cornelius Van Til would argue that such an evidential approach would only lead human beings to create God in their own image since they would be using human criteria of rationality and evidence instead of divinely authorized criteria in an attempt to reach a knowledge of God.<sup>19</sup> Lewis saw a common ground of common reasoning but Van Til excluded such common ground on the criteria that apologetics simply must begin with God, not work its way toward a belief in God. Van Til’s position was that any autonomous deduction at which man would attempt to arrive at a knowledge of God would only lead him to idolatry. Man may never come to belief in the true God through reason apart from divine

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<sup>17</sup> Van Til, page 58, 59

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, “Mere Christianity,” page 162

<sup>19</sup> Alister E. McGrath, “Intellectuals Don’t Need God, and Other Modern Myths,” (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan Publishing, 1993), page 218

revelation. Although the presuppositionalism of Van Til is perceived as circular reasoning, Van Til would respond that all reasoning is basically presuppositional because everyone reasons from the point of their own presuppositions and end up proving those very same things. He has already relegated reasoning to two separate circles of reasoning, that of the Christian and that of the secularist. The charge of circular reasoning did not bother him but this is deftly critiqued by John Warwick Montgomery who concluded that in a venue of many belief systems, one must have outside criteria with which to gauge against it. Montgomery's point is well taken in a critique of Van Til that the inductive character of Christian faith must be identified by supporting facts observable by all men. Such historical and otherwise epistemological facts were employed by the Lord Himself as well as the apostles to verify the historical character of revelatory events.<sup>20</sup> As Montgomery has stated, "we must become all things to all men. We must operate on the non-Christian's territory...."<sup>21</sup> Only then can Christianity be seen to stand head and shoulders above the multitude of belief systems in the world. Only then can reason escape the charge of circular reasoning in the admission of a neutral standard of consistency as criteria from without is imposed on each position thereby testing its validity.<sup>22</sup>

### **III. AIMING AT THE HEART AND NOT THE HEAD**

Presuppositionalists like Van Til commonly believe that classical arguments are ineffective simply because they cannot reveal enough about God for fallen man in his current condition to assist him to actually arrive at a knowledge of God. Evidentialists on the other hand would say that presuppositionalism amounts to fideism and does not help people to venture toward God. Evidentialism maintains that man has within him the power of reason in order, for one thing, to arrive at lucid conclusions about God as Lord and King.

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<sup>20</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, "Faith Founded on Fact," (Newburgh, IN; Trinity Press, 1978), page 121

<sup>21</sup> Montgomery, page 122

<sup>22</sup> IBID., page 118

In a critique of Van Til, John Frame agrees with him in stating that mankind's inability to respond to God is not so much an intellectual problem but a moral weakness and refusal to accept what is clearly revealed.<sup>23</sup> The intellectual barrier of man to grasp an understanding of God is seemingly rooted somewhere deeper than his intellect. Lewis also seemed to aim at something deeper than superficial intellect when he emphasized the well known tool or method of *story* in order to dig deeper into the heart of man than conscious intellect. Experience may well show that believers when asked, rarely list any particular intellectual argument that led them to faith in Christ. The barrier over and over again was seemingly not an intellectual barrier but something else. A biblical response may have merit with the prospect of something deeper such as man's spirit that must be reached for conversion, not merely his mind. In their different approaches to apologetics it seems that both Van Til and Lewis would agree with this proposition.

In an overview and comparison of apologetic methods, it is difficult to do better than to compare the methods of giants in the faith such as Lewis and Van Til with the apologetic method of Jesus Christ. In observing how Jesus addressed men and women his approach seemed to be ever to find a way to go where people were in the everyday world. He used stories, presented data, spoke in parables, called men to repentance, answered questions with questions and always seemed to aim primarily at deeper parts of the heart than mere intellect. The common ground for all apologetic method could very well simply be aiming at the heart or spirit of man in whatever tools one uses in order to arrive at that imperative destination, a heart touched by God. Both views then of Lewis and Van Til have significant merit in reaching people for the gospel of the kingdom. Both methods may no doubt produce transformed saints as the Spirit of God steers the method to its intended mark, the spirit of man. The preferred method then may well depend on the type of person being addressed. Only the apologist himself may be able to determine which method would be most effective in any given circumstance.

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<sup>23</sup> Frame, page 232

## **CONCLUSION**

In a review of what this paper has covered with a brief summary of evidentialism and presuppositionalism it seems apparent that the position of Van Til is somewhat more rooted in bringing to bear a biblically based apologetic method in reaching man at the point of his noetic limitations. However since he sees no common ground with unbelievers he therefore limits what is then presentable to unbelievers. Although Lewis would acknowledge noetic limitations, he does not exactly present specific tools to deal with this problem. The use of myth and story or pointing to an inherent sense of morality, are vague notions with little concrete certainty when it comes to actual transformation of a life. Van Til's method however could very well be inhibitory in its presuppositions, assuming that men cannot be receptive to data designed only to lead them as far as theism. Such a limited method may prevent attempts to reach out to individuals of certain stature and demeanor who need to see the truth and who may be helped by such an argument. The strength of Van Til's method however seems to clearly be a biblically based presentation of truth to man's conscience and depravity. The method of Lewis seems more inclined to go to the place where many men reside, seeking to dislodge them from their own position of atheism and move them in a direction toward the one true God. He sees a common ground of reason as all men are created in the image of God. The strength of this method is in its hopefulness of reaching out to where man is in his darkness to inch him along toward the God of the Bible. Only God knows what the individual unbeliever needs in order to bring him to the faith. Only God can change a heart. What is imperative is that we first and foremost seek to work with Him in all His working.

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