



Bahnsen, Greg L.

Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis

Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998. Pp. xxiv + 764.
Hardcover. \$39.99. ISBN 9780875520988.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

On New Year's Eve of 2008 I set as a goal to have *Van Til's Apologetic* read and reviewed by the end of February 2009. Well February came and went with no prospect of me being done with this massive volume any time soon. It is only in the recent past that I've completed the book, and now that I've taken the time to jot down some thoughts on it. I came to this work at a disadvantage because I've not read Cornelius Van Til for myself so I'm unable to assess how well Bahnsen actually represented and understood him. As I understand it there are other presuppositionalists who disagree with Bahnsen at certain points (see e.g., John Frame's comment on the back cover) but having neither read them nor Van Til I can't be sure of which points exactly or whether or not their alternative views are correct. That being said, I was able to gain what I believe is a good understanding of Van Til's thought from Bahnsen in this volume.

Described as "something of an anthology with running commentary" (xxi) Bahnsen follows an analytical outline in which he reproduces select readings from Van Til's various works and then his explanation of them. This procedure produced something of a visually unappealing aesthetic in the text itself in that Van Til's words were printed in one font (Arial?) with Bahnsen's printed in another (Times New Roman?), but ugly as this may have been it made for a helpful distinction nonetheless. From the outset I have to say that Van Til was not a particularly clear writer (as admitted in the preface [xx-xxi]) so Bahnsen's analyses were indispensable in deciphering what was being said much of the time. Having not read widely in philosophy or related areas of the discipline like epistemology I had to work through this book very slowly, and it is after having read through this book that I'd suggest using it for reference. The format hindered the flow in my opinion, but this is characteristic of most commentaries, which coincidentally I only use for reference.

That said, the progression of thought flowed well and made sense. Bahnsen opens with an intro to Van Til's apologetic which is followed by a chapter on the task of apologetics itself which is then followed by a summary chapter that offers illustrations and examples of presuppositionalism in practice. I especially appreciated Bahnsen's remark that "[o]ne of the compelling features of presuppositionalism is its accessibility and suitability to believers at all

levels of academic sophistication.” (88) Chapters 4-6 deal mainly with epistemology while chapter 6 also lays the groundwork for the unbeliever’s stance against God and the Gospel. This all segues nicely into chapter 7 which spells out in some detail the presuppositional apologetic argument. Chapter 8 goes on to compare presuppositionalism to the “traditional” apologetic methods while criticizing them for various reasons, among which are: they are non-Reformed, assume the autonomy of man, believe in brute facts, etc. This all flows from Van Til’s equation of theology, philosophy, and evangelism with apologetics. For Van Til one’s apologetic method must match their theology and so when Reformed apologists engage in “traditional” apologetics they do so in a manner that is counterintuitive to their theology. If I had to choose just one thing that stands at the center of Reformed theology and Van Til’s apologetic then I’d be forced to say the sovereignty of God, and it is mainly on this point that Van Til saw the apologetics of Arminian, Catholic, and Lutheran believers as being deficient. Chapter 9 closes the book with a helpful concluding summary on how to defend the faith.

This book has many wonderful features such as an introductory biography on Cornelius Van Til (more books should have these!), an extensive and detailed analytical outline of the book's contents, as well as a bibliography of Van Til's writings. Detailed Scripture, name, and subject indices as well as footnotes throughout add to the overall appeal of this work. And it doesn't hurt from a functional/aesthetical standpoint that this book has a durable hardcover, with an attractive glossy dust jacket, and sewn binding (I'm assuming) that allows it to lay open no matter what section you are turned to. However, I offer this caveat: this is a book by Reformed Christians for Reformed Christians. The non-Reformed will certainly be able to learn from this work, as I undoubtedly have, but they'll find themselves unlikely to agree with much that is said because it is based on Reformed theology. There are times when unnamed Arminians, Lutherans, or 'Romanists' are referenced concerning their beliefs when in point of fact they don't believe such things (e.g., p. 42 where the unnamed Arminian is said to believe in “degrees of deadness” while what it later described as the Calvinist view of differences of knowledge more accurately summarizes what Arminians believe). Nonetheless, this is a quality volume on all counts; I highly recommend it to any/everyone interested in Christian apologetics.