CRITIQUING VAN TILLIAN PRESUPPOSITIONALISM: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF *REFORMING APOLOGETICS* AND "CHRISTIANITY AND VAN TILLIANISM"

A Book Review

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by

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*I affirm the honor code.

Fesko, J. V. *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019.

Mathison, Keith A. "Christianity and Van Tillianism." *Tabletalk Magazine*, August 21, 2019. https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/christianity-and-van-tillianism-2019-08/

This paper offers a comparative review of J. V. Fesko's *Reforming Apologetics* and Keith A. Mathison's article "Christianity and Van Tillianism," examining how each accurately presents Cornelius Van Til's presuppositionalism and critiques his apologetic methodology. Fesko brings both pastoral and academic experience to his work, serving as a minister in an Orthodox Presbyterian Church and as the Harriett Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. Mathison is an accomplished scholar and serves on the faculty of Reformation Bible College as its inaugural R. C. Sproul Chair of Theology. "Christianity and Van Tillianism" offers a well-organized explanation and criticism of Van Til's presuppositionalism from several vantage points. *Reforming Apologetics* defends a classical Reformed approach to apologetics, grounded in the overarching theme of the book of nature and the book of Scripture, with the overarching premise that the Reformed community has largely lost sight of the former. The book also devotes space for a critique of Van Til's misreading of Thomas Aquinas, his view of the incommensurability of worldviews, and his version of a transcendental argument for the existence of God. Together, both works offer a comprehensive critical assessment of presuppositionalism from a Van Tillian perspective.

"Christianity and Van Tillianism"

Article Overview

Mathison offers a substantial critique of Van Til's theology and apologetic methodology. He seeks first to present Van Til's teachings charitably before challenging them,

inviting proponents and critics of Van Til alike to consider his arguments objectively. The opening section provides historical and intellectual context, examining potential influences on Van Til's thought. Because Van Til's apologetic approach is grounded in his theology, Mathison considers it essential to explain Van Til's presuppositionalism within the Reformed tradition.[1] The following section therefore examines Van Til's Reformed theology. After presenting Van Til's thought in its strongest form, Mathison challenges Van Tillian presuppositionalism through eight criticisms, each summarized below. On the basis of these criticisms, he reaches three conclusions: Van Til's apologetic methodology should be rejected, it is inconsistent with Reformed theology, and its underlying motivation is misguided.[2]

Summarizing Critiques of Van Til

The first criticism of Van Til's writing concerns the tension between his stated reliance on biblical exegesis and the limited exegetical support for his claims. Rather than providing substantial exegesis of his own, Van Til drew on the work of colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary to substantiate his arguments, raising questions about the evidentiary basis and authority of his conclusions.[3]

The second criticism pertains to the ambiguity or vagueness of Van Til's writings. Not his writings in their entirety, but aspects that confuse the larger points being made.[4] Philosophers are technical thinkers; they aim for logical coherence and clarity, especially in analytical philosophy. Van Til breaks this by redefining philosophical vocabulary, such as analogical and concrete universals.[5] He assigns his own meanings to words that other philosophical works consistently define. The result is unclear communication and confusing argumentation.

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[1] Keith A. Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," *Tabletalk Magazine*, August 21, 2019, 4.

[2] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 32-34.

[3] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 10.

[4] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 10.

[5] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 10-11.

Moreover, Van Til adopted terms and concepts from philosophical idealism, which permeated his academic milieu. Given the shifts in contemporary academic schools of thought, this presents the problem that Van Til's philosophical language is difficult to interpret. According to Mathison, the primary ambiguity in Van Til's writing concerns the epistemology of unbelievers.[6] Van Til appears to make contradictory claims about what unbelievers can and cannot know, commonly described as the antithesis. Mathison strongly emphasizes this criticism, since the antithesis is among the most formidable features of Van Til's apologetic.[7]

The third criticism concerns the classical trinitarianism expressed in his doctrine of God. The Trinity is foundational to Christian theology and, unsurprisingly, to Van Til's writings. However, Mathison points to contradictions in Van Til's statements regarding the personhood of God.[8] Sometimes Van Til affirms three persons, and at other times affirms a single person in God.[9] Mathison notes that, at best, Van Til defines personhood differently across several references, raising concerns about equivocation.[10] If person is not being used equivocally, Van Til is plainly contradicting himself.[11] The charge against Van Til from his trinitarian theology is amplified by the significance of the doctrine itself. Since the Trinity is essential, one would reasonably expect clarity insofar as clarity is possible.

The fourth criticism is Van Til's misrepresentation of historical theologians.[12] Getting another person's views wrong is not necessarily detrimental; however, in Van Til's case, much of his apologetic framework stems from misrepresenting those figures.[13] In particular, Thomas

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[6] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 11.

[7] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 12.

[8] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 13.

[9] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 13.

[10] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 13.

[11] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 13.

[12] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 18-19.

[13] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 19.

Aquinas and his teachings on the Creator-creature distinction.[14] Similarly, Van Til misrepresents Calvin's understanding of what unbelievers know.[15]

The fifth criticism is that Van Til does more than borrow language from philosophical idealism; he allows the system to infiltrate his teachings.[16] Although Van Til strongly criticizes idealist philosophy, Mathison argues there is at least the appearance of influence by the use of idealist terminology.[17] Van Til's doctrine of antithesis, for instance, also maintains similarities to Kantian thought.[18] Secondary idealist thought is evident in the work of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd, whom Mathison identifies as having been substantially influenced by idealism and, in turn, as having influenced Van Til's theology.[19] Surely Van Til himself did not adopt idealism; however, Mathison's critique concludes that the influence of idealism on his writings creates more confusion.[20]

The sixth criticism is less about Van Til's presuppositionalism than about his treatment of classical apologetic methodology.[21] Van Til criticizes the classical method on its use of human reason; however, Mathison explains why Van Til's criticisms presuppose a misunderstanding of how classicalists employ human reason. That is, Van Til assumes classicalists take the mind as the "metaphysical ultimate" or final authority when they do not.[22]

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[14] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 19.

[15] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 20.

[16] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 22-23.

[17] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 23-24.

[18] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 24.

[19] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 24-25.

[20] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 25.

[21] What I call classical apologetics, Mathison calls "traditional" apologetics. I will use the former.

[22] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 26.

Mathison takes this point further by showing a "presupposer" in Van Til's demand to presuppose Christian theism, thereby failing to separate from classical apologetics.[23]

The seventh criticism is Van Til's rejection of natural theology. He believed natural theology is incompatible with Reformed theology because it presumes underlying logical foundations that are religiously neutral.[24] Van Til accepted the use of theistic proofs on his own theological terms: to presuppose the ontological Trinity. Since man cannot have true knowledge, natural theology apart from presupposing God is futile. Mathison factors in Van Til's inconsistent statements on the unbelievers' knowledge, arguing that his other statements that unbelievers do have true knowledge make natural theology a feasible task.[25] Additionally, Mathison criticizes Van Til for a problematic version of natural theology that appears overly simplified and tied to a particular post-Enlightenment tradition.[26] Lastly, the point is made against Van Til that his rejection of natural theology is inconsistent with Reformed theology.[27]

Critical Evaluation

From the outset, Mathison genuinely sought to circumvent any straw men in representing Van Til's perspective. Essentially, the preface to his article commends Van Til for his godly character and admirable intentions.[28] On several occasions, he speaks highly of Van Til, when, in all likelihood, other Christian thinkers might not. This testifies to his commitment to productive Christian scholarship and affirms his objective to avoid straw men. This personal sincerity compels the reader into a positive argumentative tone.

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[23] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 26-27.

[24] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 27-28.

[25] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 28.

[26] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 29.

[27] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 29. The eight criticism in Mathison's article does not pertain to Van Til himself but to *some* of his followers, claiming that they behave in a cultish manner toward Van Til, seemingly viewing him as irrefutable and even infallible.

[28] Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," 1.

Stylistically, Mathison again proves his commitment to accurately representing Van Til by devoting a fair analysis to Van Til's historical influences and theological background prior to his refutations. His critiques are carefully reasoned and clearly explained. He avoids drawing conclusions that extend beyond the evidence supporting his refutations. For example, in discussing the philosophical influence of idealism, he does not conclude that Van Til's views are therefore false.

In reviewing these collective critiques, I conclude that Mathison effectively identifies weaknesses in Van Til's thought; however, I remain unconvinced that his refutations justify rejecting Van Til's presuppositionalism. The critiques are more rhetorical than philosophical. The first critique's observation that Van Til's work lacks exegetical analysis may reveal inconsistencies in his writings, but it does not establish that his conclusions are false. Likewise, Mathison's criticism of Van Til's deficient historical theology does not invalidate his presuppositional conclusions. The same applies to the debate over natural theology and classical apologetics. Finally, Mathison's critique of philosophical idealism's influence on Van Til's thought comes perilously close to committing the genetic fallacy.[29] These criticisms address Van Til as a theologian but do not substantively engage with Van Tillian presuppositionalism itself. Collectively, they illustrate the principle that multiple weak arguments do not amount to a strong one.

Mathison's second and third critiques constitute the most serious objections, as they identify logical inconsistencies in Van Til's approach. Mathison offers compelling grounds for questioning the apparent self-contradictions in Van Til's claims concerning the possibility of knowledge among unbelievers and the doctrine of the Trinity. The seriousness of these alleged contradictions warrants a response from contemporary Van Tillian presuppositionalists. If

[29] His eight argument, which I do not deal with here, is also not substantively relevant to refuting Van Tillian presuppositionalism.

Mathison's critique withstands scrutiny, then a more coherent apologetic approach should be preferred.

Reforming Apologetics

Book Overview

Reforming Apologetics seeks to reconnect Christian apologetics with its Reformed theological roots. Fesko's primary objective is to restore natural theology—what he terms "the book of nature"—to its proper place within Reformed Christian apologetics.[30] Fesko argues that Reformed apologetics has become one-dimensional in recent years, relying solely on Scripture as its method of defending the faith. He makes the case for the legitimacy of natural theology, emphasizing its historical significance. The book is structured accordingly.

Chapter 1 examines the "light of nature" as presented in the Westminster Confession. This concept comprises three elements: natural law, human reason, and God's natural revelation inure.[31] Fesko draws on Anthony Burgess's lectures to explain the light of nature through the interplay between common notions and the effects of the Fall. Common notions encompass knowledge accessible to human beings concerning God, creation, and morality.[32] Chapter 2 establishes the historical foundations of common notions by developing the concept through Burgess's exegesis of Romans 2:14-15. Fesko then elucidates the relationship between Thomas Aquinas's views on natural law and Burgess's account of common notions, with particular attention to Aquinas's affirmation that certain forms of knowledge are self-evident within the natural order.[33] Fesko also discusses historical theologians such as Francis Junius and Francis

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[30] J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 4.

[31] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 13.

[32] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 15.

[33] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 33.

Turretin. Tracing the historical roots of the subject, he concludes that Reformed thinkers throughout history readily affirmed common notions.[34]

Chapter 3 aims to establish the accuracy of John Calvin's view of natural theology. Through a careful examination of Calvin's writings, Fesko concludes that Calvin did teach a version of common notions by way of "preconception," or innate knowledge, of God.[35] Chapter 4 largely critiques Van Til's interpretation of Aquinas, concluding that Van Til understood Aquinas to hold that human beings can attain true knowledge of God through natural theology alone.[36] Fesko attributes Van Til's misreading of Aquinas to three factors: an anachronistic interpretation shaped by a post-Enlightenment perspective, a false dichotomy between Aquinas's philosophy and theology, and insufficient engagement with primary sources.[37]

Chapter 5 offers a substantive examination of historic worldview theory, a philosophical framework that notably posits the incommensurability of competing worldviews.[38] Fesko traces this position through Kuyper and Van Til, examining Van Til's doctrines of antithesis and common ground and their implications for theology. Ultimately, Fesko rejects Van Til's perspective in favor of an approach that promotes engagement with unbelievers without, in his view, capitulating to human autonomy as Van Til believed would result.[39] Chapter 6 evaluates the transcendental argument for the existence of God and traces its historical development in the work of Immanuel Kant and Cornelius Van Til. Fesko explains Van Til's influence of Kantian idealist philosophy and identifies significant parallels between their thought.[40] In conjunction with his assessment of the historic worldview theory, he likewise

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[34] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 46.

[35] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 58.

[36] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 73.

[37] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 81.

[38] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 98.

[39] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 133.

[40] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 141-142.

rejects aspects of the transcendental argument, challenging the claim that it is the most biblically consistent approach. He contends that the argument should be employed only when unbelievers espouse a systematic worldview.[41]

Chapter 7 addresses a frequent objection to the use of natural theology: that it entails an admission of dualistic thinking.[42] Dualism in the sense of heavenly and earthly knowledge. Fesko's refutation focuses chiefly on Dooyeweerd's thought. He rejects Dooyeweerd's conclusions, particularly because of what he sees as Dooyeweerd's misunderstanding of nature and grace, and of separation and distinction.[43] Chapter 8 serves as the application of the principles established in the preceding chapters to sketch out how natural theology might function within a truly Reformed apologetic.[44] Fesko explains epistemological challenges of the postfall world, the possibility of meaningful interaction between believers and unbelievers whose worldviews conflict, the role of the book of nature in Reformed apologetics, and the discipline of apologetics more broadly.

Critical Evaluation

Reforming Apologetics has a glaring weakness, one that Fesko acknowledges in his opening remarks: he is a professional systematician and historical theologian, not a professional apologist. Consequently, the book reads primarily as a historical examination of Reformed thought rather than as a work of apologetics. Apologetics remains secondary throughout, and Fesko does not engage substantively with its practical application until the final chapter. To be fair, Fesko explicitly notes that "This is neither a comprehensive presentation of apologetics nor a programmatic proposal."[45] Nevertheless, the book's overall impression—including its title,

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[41] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 156.

[42] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 161.

[43] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 179, 184.

[44] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 193.

[45] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 193.

Reforming Apologetics (with emphasis on apologetics)—is misleading and thus obscures its objective.

I would argue this is not a book on Reformed apologetics but rather a retrieval of historical Reformed theology. It offers many valuable insights that could inform apologetic work; however, my criticism arises from what Fesko himself sets out to accomplish. Form and flow—the organization of topics and progression from one topic to the next—are also not as clear as they could be. I agree with Fesko's assessment that the transcendental argument should be employed only on specific occasions.[46] Here, we see an engagement between Reformed theology and apologetics. A more extensive discussion of this engagement would have coincided with a text devoted to apologetics.

Comparing Fesko and Mathison's Approaches

Fesko and Mathison adopt a consistent historical approach. Both argue that Van Tilian presuppositionalism is ultimately incoherent as a Reformed apologetic method. They likewise criticize Van Til's interpretation of Aquinas, the influence of idealism on his thought, and his account of the antithesis between worldviews. Their critiques reflect a shared commitment to a faithful Reformed approach to apologetics. Their emphases nevertheless differ insofar as Fesko gives greater attention to Aquinas and the transcendental argument, whereas Mathison focuses more extensively on philosophical terminology.

Both works appeal to historical theological sources to argue that a truly Reformed theology invites the study of natural theology and supports a classical approach to Christian apologetics. They contend that contemporary Reformed apologists have lost sight of the deep natural theological undertaking consistent with a truly Reformed theology. They both seek to draw attention to this decline. In conclusion, Fesko's and Mathison's works offer a fresh

[46] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 156.

perspective on how Reformed apologetics can engage unbelievers faithfully and defend the Christian faith.

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for 28660. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.