Introduction

Christian thinkers throughout the ages have felt the burden to guard and develop what often seem to be three competing ideals—the systematic harmony of Christian doctrine (Luke 24:44), the novelty of certain paradoxical doctrines (John 6:52–60), and the possibility of a robust Christian apologetic (Acts 17:31). All too often, however, brilliant theologians have hardily embraced two out of the three above-mentioned aims, only to be frustrated by the third. For example, those who have proven to be capable defenders and organizers of Christian theology have at times betrayed embarrassment about apparently contradictory doctrines such as the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, etc. Among those who resist the temptation of heretical resolutions to such paradoxes, a common strategy is to settle with an unhappy compromise between an apologetic where the distinctive Christian doctrines play no significant role, and a class of "supernatural" mysteries that admit for no rational proof. Other theologians have reveled in the mysterious truths of Christianity and set them up as the centerpieces of the Christian system, but flatly disparaged the responsibility to produce a compelling defense of Christianity. And still a third group has taken advantage of theological paradoxes as apologetic tools that possess an inherent capacity to illuminate the absurdity of the human situation, but only so long as we resist the temptation to capture their essential significance as parts of a static system.

Against the backdrop of the historical tension between theological system, paradox, and apologetics, Dr. Cornelius Van Til stands out as anomalous, if only for the harmony between the three ideals that he aspired to engender. Although he spent the bulk of his career occupying the chair of apologetics at Westminster seminary, Van Til's students have long recognized his profundity as a theologian and Christian philosopher. A military general devotes himself to assessing the strategic advantages of his own position and the weaknesses of his opponent's. Likewise, Van Til

© James Clarke and Co Ltd 2015

SAMPLE

was preoccupied both with the nature of the Reformed theological system, and the details of secular philosophies. Van Til's novel conclusion was that certain theological paradoxes, such as the doctrine of the ontological Trinity are essential to the coherence of Christian theology, and to the potency and validity of a Christian apologetic. His proposed "Copernican shift" involved the claim that genuine knowledge must revolve around the Triune God—the ideal of unity in difference—and His revelation concerning the proper aims and boundaries of human comprehension. To be specific, Van Til held that nothing about reality can be known truly, except as it is understood as an expression of God's eternal plan for the cosmos, and unless it is appreciated as accessible to the human mind through the mediation of the Triune God, the very archetype of harmony in difference. The proof for this Christian position turns on the impossibility of its pagan and secular alternatives, which cannot scale the enduring one-many problem of philosophy. So long as the unbeliever carries on as if his principles are able to govern facts; as if his intellect makes contact with reality; as if there is a proper and productive order for society, etc., he betrays his dependence on the Triune God. For, the history of philosophy has only confirmed man's[2] incapacity to transcend himself, and directly confirm that reality is marked by (much less headed for more profound degrees of) the sort of harmony that is generally conducive to human life and reasoning. Only the God Who embodies perfect unity and difference in Himself, and exhaustively sustains the creation as His analogue can authoritatively instill, and further, justify human confidence about such matters. Although the Trinity is unmistakably paradoxical, renewed acquaintance with Him through the saving work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the precondition of knowledge. Counterintuitive as it may be, genuine coherence in theology (and every realm of inquiry), a valid and compelling apologetic, and honor for Christian paradox can only be upheld if the three are allowed to qualify and interpenetrate one another.

If nothing else Van Til's vigorous claims have caught the attention of other Christian thinkers. And yet, Van Til's ambiguities, sparsely developed inferences, and wandering writing style have led many readers to applaud his spirit but to reject his more ostentatious claims. Still others simply deride his project as basically confused. Arguably, the basic difficulty with Van Til's theological-apologetic is that the alleged "harmony" between systematic knowledge, apologetics, and paradox appears to devolve into a procedure

2. In agreement with a handful of contemporary Christian and secular philosophers, the present author is convinced that when referring to persons without regard for their sex, it is preferable to use masculine nouns and pronouns rather than feminine nouns and pronouns, or both together. Cf. Bonjour and Sosa, *Epistemic Justification*, 11 n. 5; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, xvi–xvii.

SAMPLE

© James Clarke and Co Ltd 2015

of: (a) relying on the laws of logic when convenient (in apologetic critiques); (b) setting logic aside when inconvenient (with respect to Christian paradox); (c) somehow using the doctrine of the Trinity as a license, and the biblical Scriptures as a guide for when to carry out (a) or (b); and then (d) designating (a), (b), and (c) a "systematic method." Supposing that such a representation were accurate, Van Til's "systematic" reasoning would be nothing more than a haphazard procedure that fails to foster, and even militates against any sort of logical coherence. It would not at all be clear how or why the Christian apologist's demand for logical consistency from his opponents, alongside his own insistence on the right to appeal to mystery could not be mimicked by advocates of any worldview. And, far from honoring the profundity of the doctrine of the Trinity and safeguarding Christian paradox, it would make the Trinity into a ground for breaking Christ's command to treat others as we would hope to be treated (Matt 7:12).

Given not only how widespread, but also how grave the above interpretation of Van Til happens to be, the present author aims to inject clarity into the situation by identifying Van Til's genuine triumphs and his relative failures, and then offering a rectification of the latter. In order to accomplish these ends the argument passes through four stages. The first part begins with a thoroughgoing examination of the three schools of thought which were the most influential on Van Til, namely Old Princeton Seminary (ch. 1), Old Amsterdam Seminary (ch. 2), and absolute idealist philosophy (ch. 3). Identification of the guiding presuppositions and collective aims of each school, as well as an explanation of their theological and philosophical terminology is essential to developing an accurate understanding of Van Til's position. Even more pertinent is an understanding of how Van Til believed he was able to preserve the great theological and philosophical insights of his forbearers, while overcoming their latent tendencies toward rationalism and irrationalism. Thus, even at the stage of historical analysis, it is necessary to register Van Til's main critiques of each school.

The second part contains a systematic statement of Van Til's Trinitarian apologetic (ch. 4), epistemology (ch. 5 and 6), and theology (ch. 7). The chief insight offered by Van Til pertains to how the doctrine of the Trinity supplies a personalist solution to the ever-reoccurring one-many problem of philosophy. Properly speaking, the one-many problem pertains to how universals may overlap with historical particulars. But, in its broadest import, the one-many problem lies at the base of questions concerning how subjects may intelligibly relate to objects; governments and citizens may live together harmoniously; ethical norms may be relevant to diverse situations; etc. The Trinity solves the problem, not as a theoretical explanation for how universal principles and ideas control matters of fact, but as a personal

SAMPLE

© James Clarke and Co Ltd 2015

Authority Who is a perfect harmony of unity and diversity in Himself, and thus uniquely qualified to guide man in developing an analogous harmony in his own life and thought. Apologetically, the Trinitarian perspective carries with it an illuminating diagnosis of sinful thinking as the self-defeating attempt to treat principles found in creation, rather than the Creator, as the ultimate sources of unity and/or diversity in reality. In terms of systematic theology, the doctrine of the Trinity proves to foster the sort of coherence between Christian doctrines after which unbelievers may only grope. And epistemologically, a Trinitarian theology implies a theory of knowledge where a given human perspective is true only if it reflects the mind of God, and justified only if that man's mind has been reoriented to God through the saving work and revelation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The genius of Van Til's position consists in the fact that the epistemology derived from the Triune God and His Word, requires a uniquely Christian interpretation of the laws of logic that renders Christian paradoxes true, and exposes non-Christian perspectives as genuine contradictions. Those who accept the biblical distinction between two fundamentally different sorts of beings—the Creator and his creation—ought to be keen to the fact that the laws of identity and contradiction do not apply to everything in the same fashion, such that all things are self-identical, and incompatible with certain other things, in the same way. The only course for determining, for example, whether perfect deity and perfect humanity may exist together in the single person of Christ is by discerning whether such a doctrine is possible or necessary within the boundaries of a concrete, systematic worldview. To be specific, Christian paradoxes are vindicated as true by virtue of the fact that (a) their supposedly conflicting elements or "poles" imply one another in a discernible fashion when set in the light of the Christian system; and (b) the paradox, in return, enhances the internal coherence of the Christian system. Nevertheless, these doctrines rightfully retain the epithet "paradox" because they never cease to challenge our day-to-day applications of certain concepts, and squarely conflict with the (widely accepted) logic that would exalt our mundane notions of identify and contradiction as standards by which we may judge God. Finally, all opposition to the Christian system and its mode of reasoning may be rejected as resting on a genuine self-contradiction, namely, that of attempting to level rational arguments against the Creator when one's godless (Trinity-less) presuppositions undermine the very possibility of rational discourse.

Having provisionally vindicated the heart of Van Til's system we return, in the third part, to the negative caricature of his position in order to discover its source, and in order to identify the extent of its validity (ch. 8). We validate the charge not only that Van Til's better insights are obscured

SAMPLE

© James Clarke and Co Ltd 2015

by his failure to develop their implications in a focused manner, but that the same oversights have actually had an adverse effect on the feasibility of his fundamental claims. Chiefly, Van Til fails to employ his own logic of implication to the extent of proving that the oneness and threeness, as opposed to mere many-ness of God mutually imply one another, and are equally indispensable to the harmony of created reality. As a result, an arbitrary element appears to infiltrate the heart of the Christian system in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish it from the irrationalism of those secular systems of thought that Van Til critiques so relentlessly. Furthermore, despite the brilliant developments supplied by several schools of thought that were inspired by, or preoccupied with similar concerns as Van Til, each one falls short of clarifying and expounding his concept of a "Christian" logic of implication, much less drawing out the import of a specifically *Tri*nitarian worldview.

Finally, in the fourth part the present author offers his own positive exposition of the Christian system according to a refined application of Van Til's method of implication. A detailed application of this method brings to light the manner in which (a) the poles of Christian paradoxes logically imply one another, and the Christian system as a whole; (b) non-Christian paradoxes and systems of thought represent genuinely self-defeating contradictions; and (c) how the above-mentioned procedure is the exclusive property of Trinitarian Christianity. The Trinity is the first among the Christian paradoxes that are vindicated in the manner described (ch. 9). The argument turns on the scriptural-covenantal observation that God's self-definition need not only exist through personal distinctions (so that God is *multi*-personal), but that every personal distinction in the Godhead must be facilitated by, and appear within the overarching context of a third, and only a third person. For, if the number of divine persons were decreased to two, then the relationship between those two persons would have to appear within an impersonalist void, since there is no third, divine and personal context to be found. If the number of divine persons were multiplied beyond three, then the relationship between any two divine persons would have to be facilitated by an additional "group" of divine persons (which is not, properly speaking, a "person"). Each individual person of the Trinity would fail to comprehend the entire divine life in and by Himself, and that which comprehended the whole of the Godhead and his self-relationship would not be a person, but an impersonal dynamic. Hence, in the Christian system, where God is a personal Absolute, it can be concluded that the oneness and threeness of God mutually necessitate one another. Utilizing a similar methodology, the apparently conflicting poles of eight additional paradoxes of the Reformed faith are proven to imply one another, and once

SAMPLE

© James Clarke and Co Ltd 2015

combined, to form a coherent system together. These paradoxes include, (1) the order and equality of divine persons; (2) the simplicity and multiplicity of the divine attributes; (3) divine immutability and temporal creation; (4) the finitude and complexity of creation; (5) the analogical and objective character of human knowledge; (6) the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man; (7) the original goodness of man and his capacity for sin; and (8) the sinlessness and genuine humanity of Jesus Christ (ch. 10–12). Finally, the argument supports the Van Tillian emphases that have been cultivated by the schools of thought described in Part III.

At the conclusion of our study we obtain a robust Trinitarian worldview the likes of which has seldom been seen. Apologists throughout the ages have offered proofs for the existence of God. A few among them have aimed at proving that God must be Triune. An even smaller group of Van Tillian presuppositionalists have argued that a personal God, who is fundamentally one and many, is the precondition of all rational discourse, and the primary object of a transcendental proof. But, the present volume is unique in its aim to demonstrate that only the specifically tri-personal God, who has reconciled men to himself in the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, can be regarded as the transcendental condition of intelligible existence. Indeed, the development of a coherent theology, of a definitive apologetic, and of a logic that consistently embraces theological paradox and excludes contradictions is proven to hinge on acknowledging the Triune God from the outset, and allowing Him to set all things in their proper light.

SAMPLE

© James Clarke and Co Ltd 2015