

REPLY TO MARK W. KARLBERG

JOHN M. FRAME

Negative reviews can be helpful to an author. I recently received such a review of my Van Til book from Michael Butler, who, following up some concerns of the late Greg Bahnsen, criticizes my account of Van Til's transcendental argument. Butler was gracious enough to forward his review to me by e-mail before it was to be published, and my reply may eventually be published at his web site in some form. Although I disagreed with Butler, I found the exchange useful, because Butler made a serious case for his position. Thinking through that argument and responding to it was a stimulating experience. Perhaps in the course of time this exchange will motivate me to further thought and improved formulations, if not retractions.

Disagreement Without Argument

Karlberg's review is quite different. He attacks my positions on a great number of matters, but almost never (I say "almost" only because I may have missed something) presents any argument for his position. He simply states dogmatically what the truth is, in his view, and how I fall short of it.

My first example: Karlberg faults me for not stressing the importance of covenant theology and the influence of Geerhardus Vos on Van Til's thought. He says that covenant theology is "the warp and woof of [Van Til's] apologetic theology." Well, that's something we could have discussed. In the book, I do mention Van Til's friendship with Vos and some Vossian influences in Van Til's writing (20-21). The appendix by Edmund P. Clowney mentions biblical-theological emphases in Van Til's preaching. In writing the book, I was certainly open to finding also in Van Til's apologetic system a major covenantal, redemptive-historical emphasis. But, in fact, Van Til does not say much about distinctively redemptive-

historical issues. He says nothing about dispensationalism. In eschatology he never gets much beyond the basics of eternal life and divine judgment. He never addresses questions about the relations of law and grace in the various historical covenants. He never presents distinctively Christocentric interpretations of Old Testament texts, except in his sermons. He even says that “theology is primarily God centered rather than Christ centered.”¹ He does discuss common grace in a redemptive-historical framework, and my book treats that in detail. He emphasizes “direct revelation in history” over against Karl Barth. He also uses phrases like “the Christian story,” which indicate his familiarity with the redemptive-historical approach to Scripture. But he doesn’t elucidate these phrases, nor do they play any substantive role in the development of his apologetic argument. Doubtless, Van Til would have *said* that redemptive history is vitally important.² But, in fact, contrary to Karlberg and William Dennison, he rarely dealt with it in his apologetic writing.

Now it is possible that I have missed something important here. This discussion would have been profitable to me if Karlberg had given some examples of the “centrality of covenant theology” in Van Til’s writing. But Karlberg offers none. Rather, he seems to assume that everybody knows he is right. So all that remains to be done is for Karlberg to denounce my “serious and glaring omission.” He seems to want me to repent of an error simply on his say-so.

Another example of Karlberg’s dogmatism: I spent four chapters of the book dealing with Van Til’s treatment of the history of apologetics. My conclusions about the apologetic tradition are much more favorable than Van Til’s. I would have found it helpful if Karlberg, who is himself a historian, had entered the discussion to show me where in this analysis I am wrong and Van Til is right.

¹Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (privately published, 1971), 2. That contrast sounds terrible, I know, to biblical theologians, but that is Van Til’s own phraseology.

²It is not difficult to *construe* Van Til’s approach in terms of covenantal categories. Thus in my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1987), I develop a Van Tilian epistemology in terms of God’s covenant Lordship. Certainly his thinking is admirably fitted to this kind of treatment. But it is interesting and curious that Van Til never did this himself.

He does not do this. He merely faults me because “in each of these cases . . . it is Van Til who loses out to his theological disputants.” In other words, I am wrong simply because I reach a different conclusion from Van Til and Karlberg.

Same on the issue of the antithesis between believer and unbeliever in knowledge. Van Til himself admitted that this is a “difficult point.”³ I spend one chapter trying to sort out five of the different ways in which Van Til tries to formulate this antithesis. It was not an easy chapter to write, and I would still be happy to receive additional help in understanding these issues. The best Karlberg can do, however, is to fault me for claiming that unbelievers know some “truths.” Oddly, he admits that Van Til himself attributes truths to the unbeliever, as “merely borrowed capital from Christianity.” Does Karlberg think that I regard the unbeliever’s knowledge as anything other than borrowed capital? If so, what did I say that gave him that idea? (Had he shown me any such passage in my book, I would have retracted it in this response.) But again, he presents no argument, just a lot of rhetoric about my “rationalistic evidentialism.”

On the Clark controversy, Karlberg objects to my conclusion that Van Til misunderstood or misrepresented Clark. Again, I ask, what was wrong with my *argument*? And again, Karlberg doesn’t say. My crime, evidently, is simply that I disagreed with Van Til to some extent (even, I must add, in the course of *defending* Van Til’s general view of God’s incomprehensibility).

Similarly, Karlberg dogmatically rejects my account of God’s decrees and of the problem of evil. He accuses me of misreading Aquinas, Butler, Carnell, and Clark, but provides not one specific instance. He attacks my view of creedal doctrinal detail without specifying how comprehensive and detailed *he* thinks creeds should be,⁴ and certainly without defending any alternative view against mine. He merely expects his readers to accept these judgments on Mark Karlberg’s say-so.

³Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 26.

⁴It is logically possible to argue that creeds should be as exhaustive as Scripture. I presume that that is not Karlberg’s position. So where does he draw the line?

Who is Mark Karlberg, to demand such instant acquiescence on the part of his readers? A writer in historical theology, as I mentioned before. To my knowledge, he has neither credentials nor expertise in apologetics or epistemology beyond the courses he took in seminary. Certainly he hasn't shown any such expertise in the present review. Why, then, did he write it? My most charitable interpretation is that Karlberg is, precisely, what I call in the book a "movement Van Tilian." He is unwilling to admit any failing of substance in Van Til (or in Machen or Kline, his other heroes). He has bought into a party line that says Van Til was almost (?) always right and his opponents almost always wrong. One of my most prominent motives in writing the book was to combat that kind of thinking. Karlberg perceives, therefore, that he and others who think like him are among the major targets of the criticisms of my book, and he feels the need for somebody to strike back. Frame doesn't buy the party line, so Karlberg must stand in the breach, come to the rescue: Karlberg *Defensor Fidei*. He does this even though he is tongue-tied when it comes to serious interaction. All he can say is (to employ a phrase Van Til uses in a different connection) "you are wrong, and I am right."

If readers find this kind of approach credible, I don't know what more I can say. But for those capable of some critical distance from movement thinking, I add this: I take the movement mentality to be the exact antithesis of Christian scholarship, the chief rule of which is that we may not idolize men. I love and admire Van Til enough, as Karlberg points out, to call him "perhaps the most important Christian thinker since Calvin." But I do not think we do Van Til – or even Calvin – a service by treating them as a deutero-canon. Godly scholars assume the existence of finitude and sin in every thinker, including themselves, and they insist on testing everything by God's Word alone. The best honor we can do for Van Til is to treat him critically, for only thus can we be serious in determining how to build on his foundation.

Is Frame a Van Tilian?

Karlberg might reply that his real intent in writing his review was to expose me to the Reformed public: to show that I was not the Van Tilian that I pretended to be.⁵ In the book, I myself raised that issue (17-18, 391). I was quite forthright, from the introductory chapters, in saying that my approach to Van Til would be one of critical analysis, not slavish defense. I told my readers that they would have to be the judges of whether or not I was a “pure” Van Tilian.

But as a matter of fact, that question is of little interest to me. I want above all to hold a scriptural position. If that turns out also to be Van Tilian, so be it. If it turns out to be evidentialist, or Clarkian, or Plantingan, or something else, that won’t bother me very much. Historical schools of thought are useful categories for analysis, but poor guides for thought. Christian thinkers should be far more concerned about what God’s Word says than about what historical party they are associating with.⁶

At the same time, I wish to emphasize here that I am not nearly as critical of Van Til as Karlberg’s review makes me appear. From Karlberg’s account, the reader would never guess that I defend enthusiastically Van Til’s distinctive positions on God’s aseity and absolute personality, the ontological Trinity as the eternal one-and-many,⁷ the universal scope of divine foreordination, the equal

⁵We gather from his italics that Karlberg intends us to feel aghast when he writes that “Frame’s work, in my judgment, marks a *decisive departure* from Van Tilian presuppositionalism.”

⁶This is one reason I did not take the course of discussing Van Til’s Dutch forebears, as Karlberg thinks I should have. Doubtless if he had written such a book, he would simply have taken Van Til’s ideas for granted and then inserted them into their historical context. But my intent was to critically analyze Van Til’s thought to determine its truth, not simply to accept his position and inquire where his ideas came from. One cannot resolve issues of truth by historical description; attempts to do that are called “genetic fallacies.” The only way to resolve controversial issues is through exegesis and argument, not historical description. That is, perhaps, one of my differences with Karlberg, for, as we have seen, Karlberg oddly seems to think he can resolve these questions without argument. Even for my purposes, of course, it might have been useful to compare Van Til with earlier Reformed thinkers; but the book is already a long one, and I still think my choice of subjects was wise.

⁷Including his rather controversial view that God is (paradoxically) in one sense *one* person.

ultimacy of election and reprobation,⁸ analogical knowledge, divine incomprehensibility,⁹ the necessity, authority, clarity, and sufficiency of both natural and special revelation, the necessity of presupposing God's Word in all of our reasoning, the relation of intellect, emotions, and will, the place of logic and paradox, the role of evidence, the nature of common grace and antithesis,¹⁰ the necessity of circular and transcendental argument, and many, many other specific points. Nor would a reader of Karlberg's review suspect that I had (or even could have) included as an Appendix a 22-page refutation of the traditional evidentialism of John Gerstner and R. C. Sproul. The main thrust of my 463-page book is defensive and affirmative. The critical observations are intended only to clarify, sharpen, and improve Van Til's own methodology.

The chief function of a review is to give readers an idea of what is in a book and what is its general thrust. In that respect, Karlberg's review is a failure.

Some Other Issues

Some may think I was too harsh earlier when I questioned Karlberg's expertise in apologetics and epistemology. But that judgment was a considered one, based not only on Karlberg's apparent inability to argue his positions, but also upon a number of places in the review where he clearly misunderstands the issues he discusses.¹¹ Examples:

1. When I described Van Til as "isolated," I did not intend that, as Karlberg thinks I did, as a criticism per se. Indeed, I indicated (37) that "such isolation may sometimes be necessary for the free

⁸Naturally I reject as absurd his talk about a "wedding" in my book "between Arminianism and Calvinism."

⁹When Karlberg quotes me as rejecting one of Van Til's arguments against Clark as "preposterous," he is referring to a discussion of a subpoint of a subpoint. Any fair-minded reader would recognize that the overall thrust of my discussion aims to defend every theological point of importance to Van Til in the controversy with Clark.

¹⁰As Karlberg says, I do question some of Van Til's formulations of the antithesis. I believe that some of them are unbiblical as well as inconsistent with one another. But the formulations I recommend, following this analysis, are Van Til's own.

¹¹My judgment is also based upon Karlberg's quite incompetent review of my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, cited above, concerning which the less said, the better.

development of important and controversial theological ideas.” My point was (and it should have been obvious) that such isolation creates problems for a thinker that may need to be remedied by his successors.¹²

2. I do not see a “tension” between Van Til’s “winsome manner” and his “vigorous apologetic defense . . . and thoroughgoing critique,” as Karlberg thinks I do. I do see a tension between Van Til’s winsomeness and his sometimes unfair criticisms of his opponents.

3. Karlberg cites my threefold analysis of reformations (confrontation, consolidation, and continuation) and points out Van Til’s career included all these aspects. I agree; indeed, I said that the three phases could not be sharply distinguished. Karlberg then warns that we shouldn’t “reduce” the “individual labors” of Van Til and others to “mere confrontation.” Did it perhaps escape Karlberg’s notice that I align Van Til primarily *not* with “confrontation,” but with “consolidation”?

4. Karlberg descends to personal criticism rather often in this review, the main thrust of it being that I am more interested in promoting my own positions than in analyzing Van Til. Certainly my analysis of Van Til is from my own point of view; no writer (certainly not Karlberg) can write from any point of view other than his own. But I certainly disavow any intention to distort Van Til’s teaching to make him sound like me, or to criticize Van Til’s work merely to enhance my own reputation. If Karlberg is going to make such accusations, let him produce some evidence. It is usually considered bad manners to raise such issues in a scholarly discussion.

¹²Nor did I intend as a criticism my statement that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was a “tiny” denomination. That was simply a statement of fact to underscore the degree of Van Til’s isolation. The size of a Christian body is never in itself ground for criticism, though the reasons for its size (whether the size be great or small) may be.

As for Karlberg’s gratuitous personal remarks about my own isolation, I grant that they are largely true, though I doubt that admission has much relevance to our discussion. Karlberg needs to be reminded that the *tu quoque* argument is a fallacy.

And it is even worse to distort what a writer says in a way that smears his character. That's what Karlberg does when he says "[Frame] believes that his work probes 'more deeply into Van Til's thought than have either his traditional friends or foes.'" This quote (from page ix) makes me sound hugely egotistical. But Karlberg has left out some significant parts of the context. The complete paragraph reads,

This is not the last word on Van Til. I hope herein to further a genuine dialogue on his work, a dialogue that has heretofore been hindered by misinformation and poorly reasoned arguments for and against him. I am trying to go more deeply into Van Til's thought than have either his traditional friends or foes. If I have not succeeded, I pray that this book will provoke one or more successful alternative accounts with the same ambitions.

Note here the first and last sentences, and the word "trying," which Karlberg leaves out of the sentence he quotes. By this distortion, Karlberg makes it look as if I am on an ego trip. In any case, what he says is false. I do *not* "believe" that my work probes more deeply than anyone else's. That depth has been my goal. Whether I have achieved it, others must judge.

5. He says that according to my interpretation of election and reprobation, "'particular people' though under the wrath of God are neither elect nor reprobate. They *become* elect or reprobate in time." As usual, he does not present any quotes or evidence that this is my view. I simply deny it. I haven't the foggiest notion why he thinks I hold such a position. There is, of course, such a thing as historical election (Israel was God's elect, but later became *lo ammi*), but there is also the eternal election and reprobation of God, forever settled in the divine decree, which I defend in Chapter 6 of my book.

6. He rejects my definition of a “presupposition” as “the fundamental religious direction of a person’s thought” and says that herein I “substitute human subjectivism for the objective revelation of God.” Nonsense. “Presupposition” does sometimes refer to something objective (i.e., to what is presupposed), but far more often it refers to the basic commitment of a human person, something subjective. That is how both Van Til and I use the term. To so define the word is not subjectivist, because in our view a person’s basic subjective commitment must be to the objective revelation of God.

Or does Karlberg imagine that even to discuss the subjective act of presupposing necessarily compromises God’s objective revelation? The most elementary fact about human knowledge is that it involves both a subject and an object.¹³ Therefore, epistemology must discuss both the subjective and the objective aspects of knowledge. Van Til understood this well. If Karlberg doesn’t understand it, he should not participate in this discussion.

7. At the end of his review, Karlberg calls us to “abandon all pretense regarding the use of rational argument to justify, validate, or corroborate the thoughts and ways of the Creator to the creature.” Is he denying the value of rational arguments in apologetics, asking us, as the earlier part of the paragraph suggests, to substitute proclamation for argument? That would be characteristic of Karlberg’s practice in this review, but it would be very much opposed to Van Til’s own conception of apologetics. Van Til eschewed fideism and insisted that Christianity was rationally defensible. He said that a testimony that is not an argument is not a testimony, and vice versa.¹⁴ Those who interpret Van Til fideistically play into the hands of his evidentialist critics, who find that a most damaging admission.

Or is Karlberg merely condemning *some kinds* of rational arguments? If so, he has confused us by not telling us which ones he has in mind. Or is he merely saying that rational arguments are

¹³And a norm, to complete my triad. See *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

¹⁴Van Til, “Why I Believe in God,” (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, n.d.), 16.

less important in Christian witness than the Word of God and the Holy Spirit? Certainly that is true, both for Van Til and for me; but I fail to see how that bears upon anything we have been discussing.

8. Finally, I should say a bit about perspectivalism, which Karlberg finds at the root of all my errors. As usual, Karlberg gets it wrong. He quotes as my “definition” of perspectivalism a passage which is not a definition at all, but a description of one implication of it. A better definition: perspectivalism is the recognition that because we are finite, sinful, and therefore fallible, we need to guard against error by looking at the truth from many angles or perspectives. Scripture recognizes this fact in giving us four gospels rather than one – four perspectives on the same events. Similarly, it gives us both Kings and Chronicles, both Jude and 2 Peter 2. It narrates the Exodus, then presents it poetically in Exodus 15 and many Psalms.

The first page of Calvin’s *Institutes* tells us that we cannot know ourselves without knowing God, and that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves. Interestingly, Calvin adds “I don’t know which comes first.” His point is that knowing God and knowing ourselves are simultaneous and inseparable. Knowing God and knowing oneself are really one single act of knowledge, viewed from different perspectives. To say this is not to identify self and God; but it is to identify *knowing* self with *knowing* God.

This implies that to know God’s Word, we must also know how the Word applies to ourselves. To miss the applications is to miss something crucially important about the Word. God gives us his Word for the purpose of application (2 Tim. 3:16-17). So one cannot understand the Bible without understanding how it applies to his life. We cannot, like the Pharisees, claim to know the “meaning” of Scripture without understanding its bearing on our lives. Interpretation and application are one.

Karlberg rejects this formulation in favor of the more traditional maxim that doctrine precedes application. Why? Again, he gives no argument. He mentions the influence of Wittgenstein on

me;¹⁵ I do not deny that I have read Wittgenstein with some profit. But that is not an argument against the truth of my view, unless we assume that we can learn nothing at all from non-Christian thinkers.¹⁶ Without argument, he says that my equation between interpretation and application “compromises Scripture’s own authority” and even “obscures the Creator/creature distinction.” I absolutely deny these charges, and I am quite bewildered by them. I really have no idea how he gets from my texts to his conclusions. But if anyone is confused about my position, let me put it this way: interpretation and application are one; but they are interpretations and applications of *Scripture*, the infallible, inerrant, supremely authoritative, and sufficient Word of the Creator God.

I suspect that part of the problem Karlberg and others have with my view at this point is that they equate God’s Word with “doctrine.” So when I say that doctrine is not prior to life, they think I am saying that God’s Word is not prior to life. I, however, follow the biblical usage in which “doctrine” (*didache, didaskalia*) is the human activity of *communicating* the Word of God. As such, doctrine, like all human activities, is part of life, and subject to Scripture. So the important thing is not to make doctrine prior to life, but to make both doctrine and life subject to Scripture.¹⁷

As for my argument that Van Til is implicitly perspectival, it should surprise nobody. Van Til is a disciple of Calvin and Kuyper, and he has a rich sense of the organic unity of God’s creation, of how everything is profoundly related to everything else through the unity of God’s eternal plan. My book discusses that at length. Would that Karlberg had paid a small amount of attention to that discussion.

What perspectivalism does is to recognize the unity of human experience under the supreme authority of God’s revelation. It

¹⁵Another genetic fallacy.

¹⁶Karlberg, of course, may be assuming that, since he rejects my criticisms of Van Til’s “extreme antithetical language.” But I argue in my book that this notion is unbiblical and not representative of Van Til at his best.

¹⁷There are some biblical senses in which life is prior to doctrine: Regeneration is prior to faith and spiritual understanding (John 3:3). Nonconformity to the world precedes our ability to test and approve God’s will (Rom. 12:2). For more on these subjects, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

removes from us the temptation of idolizing some element of human experience, whether traditional or contemporary, and it frees us to judge our experiences by God's Word alone, *sola Scriptura*.¹⁸ So the thrust of perspectivalism is precisely opposite to what Karlberg thinks it is. And, incidentally, it therefore sets us free from the kind of blind traditionalism and party spirit that characterizes Karlberg's review. Perhaps that is why Karlberg is so strongly bent on opposing it. I can only ask readers to go back and read what I have actually written, testing it by God's Word. I have provided extensive scriptural support for my positions, and I can only ask that that support be examined seriously.

¹⁸See my "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997) 269-291, with a forum discussion. Also published as Appendix B in *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997), 175-201.