

A Letter from Cornelius Van Til

to

Francis Schaeffer

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Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer
Chalet les Melezes
Huemoz sur Ollon
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Dear Francis:

You remember that some time ago I sent you a copy of a memorandum that I wrote on your Wheaton Lectures. Now that your book *The God Who Is There* appeared I should like to make some further remarks.

Let me preface what I say, by repeating what I said in the memorandum, that I have the greatest admiration for you personally and for your work at L'Abri. Those who have been with you there speak in the most glowing terms about what you accomplish with modern intellectuals.

Let me, to begin with, stress the fact that I think we both have essentially the same goal before us in our work. We are seeking to have modern man, in particular modern educated young men and women, accept Jesus Christ as he speaks to us with absolute and infallible authority in the original languages of the Old and New Testament as the Savior and Lord.

Moreover, I think we agree that the biblical gospel of sovereign, saving grace, which modern man needs, is best reproduced in the Reformed Confessions. When the Westminster Confession speaks of God as "alone and unto himself all-sufficient" and as "the alone fountain of being" it is speaking of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost (Clyst 2) of which the Scripture speaks. It is this triune God of Scripture who is there. It is this God who has created the world

and who is, accordingly, manifest in the world. The works of creation and of providence are the works of this God. He who does not recognize the presence and all-controlling activity of this God in nature and in history therefore, in a basic sense, misinterprets all the facts with which he deals in any way.

I think you will agree, then, that no form of natural theology has ever spoken properly of the God who is there. None of the great Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, and none the great modern philosophers, like Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Kierkegaard and others, have ever spoken of the God who is there. The systems of thought of these men represent a repression of the revelation of the God who is there.

Again, we know that man has been created in the image of this triune God. Every man is therefore confronted with the revelation of the triune God within his own constitution as well as by the facts of his environment. Man cannot turn on any button on the dial of his self-consciousness but he will see the face of this God who is there. The triune God of Scripture who is there is everywhere there and is everywhere unescapably there.

We know this fact that the God who is there is everywhere and unescapably there because he has told us this in the Scripture. He has spoken to us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the trinity. Jesus tells us that he is one with the Father. By directing the Apostles of Christ the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity, has given us the Scriptures. From the Scriptures, as the word of the triune God, we learn what he has done in relation to man. At the beginning of history he established a covenant with man. By obeying the command of God man would attain eternal life.

By disobeying he would reap eternal death.

Man disobeyed. As a consequence he, and the whole created universe with him, rests under the curse of God. The wrath of God is since the fall of man revealed from heaven. The God who is there is everywhere and unescapably there to covenant-breaking, sinful man as the God who punishes all iniquity upon all men. To be sure, God restrains his wrath. He gives men rain and sunshine and fruitful seasons. He calls all men to repentance through the good gifts that he gives them. But so long as they do not repent they remain under his wrath. This fact, as Calvin puts it, all men ought to see because it is there clearly to be seen. Every form of evil, physical as well as moral, is, in the final analysis, a consequence of human sin. However, no man has, from a study of himself and of the facts of nature by means of observation and ratiocination, ever come to the conclusion that he is a creature of God and that he is a sinner in the sight of God, who, unless he repents, abides under the wrath of God. The "natural man" assumes that he can and must interpret himself and the facts of the universe without any reference to the God who is actually there. The "natural man" assumes that the facts of the space-time world are not what Christ, speaking for the triune God, says they are. For the natural man the facts are just there. They are contingent, i.e. not preinterpreted by God.

The "natural man" assumes that there is a "principle of rationality," including the laws of logic, i.e. the law of identity, the law of excluded middle and the law of contradiction which is, like the "facts," just there. The facts he speaks of he assumes to be non-created facts. There is no "curse" that rests upon nature because of man's sin. The "natural man" assumes that he himself, being 'just there,' can relate the space-time facts which are 'just there' by means of a "principle of rationality" that is 'just there' to one another or that if he cannot do this, no one can. It does not occur to him to think of God as the one whose thoughts are higher than his thoughts. How do I, as a Christian, know all this information about the "natural man." Christ tells me this in Scripture. Moreover, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit gives me life from the dead so that I understand this not merely in intellectual fashion but

existentially, I have been born again unto knowledge. Once I am born again I know that I am a creature made in the image of God. I now know that together with all men I became a sinner, a covenant-breaker, subject to the wrath of God. I now know that Christ died to redeem me from the curse that rested upon me for my disobedience of the law of God and that in him I am now justified. I now that I am, together with the body of the redeemed, on the way to my Savior's presence. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism I am now persuaded that "I belong, not to myself, but to my faithful Savior and that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair shall fall from my head." Everything in the I-It dimension as well as everything in the I-thou dimension is unified by means of the all-directing control of Jesus Christ, the Savior of his people. The city of God will be victorious over the city of men. The powers of hell cannot prevent the victory of the work of the triune God for the salvation of the world.

It is now my task, assigned to me by my Savior, to beseech all men everywhere to be reconciled to God. It is now my task as a simple believer to witness as a simple believer by word of mouth and by my life to simple unbelievers. I must tell men plainly and simply that things are much worse with them than they themselves assume them to be. To my simple unbelieving neighbor I must be like the doctor. When the doctor comes, I tell my neighbor, he does not ask you, as the patient, to diagnose the nature of your disease. The doctor may ask you, I say to my neighbor, where it hurts. But for all that, the doctor himself makes the diagnosis of your distress.

The diagnosis is that you have a disease that will lead to death. You are on the staircase that leads downward to eternal separation from the love of God. You are on this staircase, not because the world, reality, just happened to be built that way but because you, with all other men, hate the triune God, the creator-redeemer of men. God calls you to repentance. Rom 2 You have spurned and continue to spurn his call. You deserve to go to hell.

Am I better than you? Not in the least! I too was in the way of death, til God reached down to

change my inmost disposition. The triune God reached down in grace to me. He gave me life! I was dead in trespasses and sins. I hated God. I was helpless in my hatred of God. I could not because I would not and I would not because I could not love God and my neighbor.

Now that I know God or rather am known of God, now that I have been, as Paul says, born again unto knowledge, now I can look back and see the nature of sin from which I have been saved. Only now that I live do I understand something of the nature of the death from which I have been rescued.

I now know that I ought to have seen that the triune God of Scripture is everywhere operative in the world. The triune God is plainly present everywhere. But I, together with all other men, had taken out my eyes. After that I needed not only new light, the light of the grace of God's redeeming work in history, but also a new power of light. "But natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

It is thus, when I speak as a simple believer to my neighbor, a simple unbeliever, that I plead with him to give up his futile, hopeless opposition to the pleading, threatening voice of God. My Lord and my Savior commands me, and in that command gives me the great privilege, of thus speaking to my neighbor. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Following the example as well as the command of my Savior, I present the universal offer of salvation to all men everywhere, so far as my voice and life can reach. I know that Jesus also said: "No one comes to me except the Father draw him." I know that my argument, however forceful and valid it may be, cannot, as such, bring men to know the truth. I know that at the beginning man was created as the image-bearer of God and as such as possessing true freedom. But I know also that this freedom of man did not consist in an ability to beyond or independently of the all controlling purposes of the triune God. Man as a creature is free within the plan of God; man become a sinful creature is

still "free" within the plan of God. He is free to sin, and therefore free to be a "slave to sin." Without the presupposition of the sovereign disposition of all things, whether in the I-it or in the I-thou dimension, there would be no freedom for man and no meaning for history.

Having said this much about my simple, unbelieving neighbor I turn to my sophisticated friends. Here you have the advantage over me. You converse constantly with modern artists, modern existentialists etc., etc., as they eat at your table, study their literature. Whereas I am only a book-worm. Even so both of us have, finally, to make our diagnosis of the sophisticated as well as of the simple unbeliever by means of our "medicine book," the Bible.

When I talk of my sophisticated unbelieving friend I do not merely "soon discover" but rather "know in advance" that his "disease" is the same as that of my simple unbelieving friend. It is the disease of the "natural man." The symptoms are different but basically the disease is the same. The medication for both is the same. Both need to be told that they are in the way of death, that the wrath of God rests upon them and will abide upon them forever unless they repent and believe the gospel. Both of them must be told that they cannot do what yet they needs must do except the Holy Spirit enables them to do it. They do not understand themselves and their world for what they are because they do not see themselves and the world in the light of the triune God who everywhere confronts them with his claims. They are like men who might wander about on the campus of Westminster Seminary, appropriating to themselves what they pleased. When approached by Mr. Gregg and asked why they were taking things that did not belong to them they would look at him "innocently," as though surprised that this campus did belong to somebody. In reality they are trying to face the reality of the God who is.

How then shall we proclaim the gospel of the God who is there to twentieth century sophisticated man? Surely you say we must do so by setting forth before him the meaning of the gospel as we find it in the Scriptures. We must

make unmistakably clear in what we say that the God who is there wants his love and service with the whole of his heart, as he engages himself in his calling whether as an artist, as a scientist, as a philosopher or as a theologian. He now follows his calling with himself as its center. He must therefore repudiate the goal of life, the standard of life and the motivation of life that have marked him up to this point. He must become a "new man" in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in order to respond properly, even if it be only in principle, to the God who is there.

But now the argument begins. Says Mr. Jones: "Are you asking me to believe that whole "system of doctrine" that your Westminster Confession of faith finds in the Bible on your say so or on the authority of the Bible itself? Well, there are many other interpretations of the Bible besides yours. Moreover, there are a number of Bibles. Or do you appeal to the authority of Jesus speaking in and through the words of the Bible? If you do then you should know that if Jesus was really a man then he was, like all men, finite and as such immersed in the contingency of all space-time reality. If you claim that Jesus was "God" as well as man for instance, in the Westminster Catechism, then you should know that no man knows because no man can know anything about such a God. You remember what Socrates said. He wanted to know the essence of holiness regardless of what gods or men had said or did say about it. In modern times Immanuel Kant worked out the implications of this Socratic principle of human inwardness more fully than Socrates did. He points out to us that what man knows he knows because his own mind has impressed its categories of thought upon the raw stuff of experience. There can therefore be no knowledge of a God such as the Westminster Confession sets forth. There can be no such a god. How could there then be anything like what you call a revelation of such a God? Propositional revelations given by such a god to man is meaningless. All the schools of modern science and philosophy agree that to say God is there, in the sense of the traditional Confessions of the Church is to speak nonsense. Many of the typical modern scientists and philosophers may believe in a god. They even defend their belief in their god against naturalists, mechanists, and sceptics and

materialists. They may believe in a personal god. They may want to give a spiritual, teleological interpretation to the course of history. For all that their gods are nothing more than projections of would-be autonomous moral consciousness of man. They agree with Kant that man himself is autonomous in the final point of reference in predication. In the eyes of all the major schools of modern thought the god who is there is dead. "When it comes to metaphysics," says Neuath, a member of the Vienna Circle, "one must indeed be silent, but not about anything." Or, as the Cambridge philosopher, F. P. Ramsey, an enthusiastic follower of Wittgenstein puts it: "What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either."

When we turn to modern theology we soon discover that its major schools agree with the starting point, the method and the conclusions of modern science and philosophy. With one accord modern theologians contend that, even though, as over against naturalism, we must speak of God we must not speak of a God who is self-sufficient and whose revelation of himself is directly and clearly given in history, more particularly in Jesus. Suppose that Jesus did think he was the Son of God. Suppose that in his own words we could hear him say that he is one with the eternal Father. Our principle of inwardness could not but rebel at this. Man is not truly a personal being if he must listen to extraneous voices. Robert Collingwood expresses the view of modern theology on the question of revelation well when he says that the modern historian must take such claims as Jesus makes when he says he has absolute authority as so much evidence into his own philosophy of history.

Such is, I believe, the attitude of modern sophisticated man in relation to the God who is there.

Excerpts from the new CD-Rom entitled: *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*, (New York: Labels Army Co.) 1997, \$250. It is currently available from the Westminster Seminary Bookstore for \$175. Shipping and Handling will not exceed \$6.00. System requirements: 486 IBM compatible computer, 15mb hard drive space, 4mb ram, Windows 3.1 or higher.