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Christian Worldview and Scientific World Pictures

A Response to Howard J. Van Till

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I wish to thank the organizers of this conference for an opportunity to reflect publicly upon the thought-provoking paper presented by Howard Van Till, Professor of Physics at Calvin college. It is good for all of us to consider as biblically-directed Christians the ways in which our Christian faith affects the way in which we undertake our scientific work in general, and our consideration of the evolution debate in particular.

I very much appreciate Van Till's coming to our campus and his presenting a candid paper. I have heard much about him for the past several years, but this is the first time we have met.

Van Till seems to present us with a three-level approach to reality. On the highest level, far above and beyond compare with His Creation, is God Himself. We apprehend Him by faith. As Christians we are called to live in communion with the sovereign God who created all things.

Out of our relationship with the living God, who is portrayed in the Scriptures, we develop on a second level a *worldview*.

Van Till rightly understands that a worldview should provide us with a framework of thought by which we deal with questions of meaning, value,

and significance. He also recognizes that many worldviews are inconsistent with the Christian faith, citing the polytheism of the ancient near East and modern philosophical naturalism as examples. A Christian worldview, in contrast, seeks to relate the Triune God revealed in the Bible with the physical Creation or Cosmos, which is understood by faith to be the handiwork of God (Ps. 19, Heb. 1,11). In speaking thus, Van Till, I am sure, speaks for all of us.

I am not sure about Van Till's distinction between *worldview* and *faith*. He says that faith involves "a personal commitment to entrust one's self to the ultimate reality that is envisioned in a worldview." A worldview, on the other hand, tends to involve a set of propositions. Our faith is not dependent upon the accuracy of the propositions which make up our worldview Van Till says, indicating that while "...the particulars of a Christian worldview may vary from one culture to another and may change with time, the faith commitment of a Christian stands fast...."

Perhaps there is great truth in what Van Till says, but I have some difficulties. I agree that Christian faith must involve personal commitment to the liv-

ing God. But I also believe that God has rather distinctive attributes described in the Bible, attributes which are to some extent propositional in nature. It seems to me that Van Till in his paper attempts to divorce Christian faith from a Christian worldview in a way which may not agree with the Bible.

There is further, in Van Till's view, the possibility that the content, including presumably the propositional content of a Christian worldview, may change with time and exhibit many cultural variations. Perhaps he has reached this conclusion from readings in religious sociology or a history-of-religions approach. I would be much happier if he could relate this statement to teaching found in the Scriptures. He makes no effort to support this conclusion from Scripture.

From 1955 to 1958 I was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, a place where theological liberalism was very much in vogue. In some of the classes there was a lot of talk about the importance of "encountering" God, but when it came to applying a biblical description to that God (as I advocated) both teacher and fellow students would immediately back away from any concrete, propositional truths. Many declared that truth could not be expressed in propositions or concrete terms. God was above and beyond propositions, they liked to say. I dissented strongly, recognizing that the "God" they were speaking about was more an abstract projection of non-personal principles of their own devising than the God revealed in the Bible. They like to talk about "seeking" God, but were upset when I said that I had been found by Him. They thought an endless search was noble, but finding was presumptuous.

While Van Till is not as clear on this matter as those at Union Theological Seminary, I find a similar strain in his thought, and I am disquieted. We need to discuss this. Is faith simply a personal commitment to God without particular, unchanging propositional content? Can faith and worldview be completely separated? What does the Bible have to say on this point?

I also have strong reservations about the distinction between *worldview* and *world picture*. (World picture is the third level of reality, according to Van Till.) Van Till wishes to conduct the scientific endeavors of humankind as part of a world picture, an arena in which "ultimate matters of religious im-

port" are not a concern. This distinction he attributes to R. Hooykaas of Utrecht. There is something to be said for this view — not everything in science has noticeable religious or philosophical import. But is there in fact a complete compartmentalization between worldview and world picture as Van Till suggests? Or, as in the electromagnetic spectrum, does one color shade into the other? I think the latter is true.

Can we discuss, for example, in the science of paleoanthropology, the relationship of *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* to our species, *Homo sapiens*, without raising "ultimate matters of religious import"? I think not. Or can we discuss the latest trends in the inflationary theory of cosmology without raising religious questions which involve a conflict of *worldviews*?

Another concern I wish to express relates to the section of the paper called "Empirical Science and the Bible." The principles Van Till supplies as biblical¹ seem to impose no cautions on the pursuit of science. We need to discuss more fully how we relate the Bible and our scientific fields.

I must also respond to some of the statements made about "World Pictures in the Christian Community Today." There is, as Van Till suggests, a wide diversity of world pictures functioning in the Christian community today. Some of them are strongly influenced by traditions of the past, but others may be captive to scientific models currently popular in the unbelieving culture in which we find ourselves. Some Christians will not be too happy to discover that (according to Van Till) they are medieval or inconsistently semi-modern. It would seem that only the evolutionary perspective passes without criticism. Van Till says:

The *evolutionary perspective* envisions a created world that is functionally complete not only in its day-to-day operation, but also in its temporal development. Evolutionary processes, like all physical processes, are interpreted as being the manifestation of divinely governed and directed phenomena contributing to the accomplishment of God's purposes. The particulars of this world picture are drawn from the results of the professional sciences....

It would seem there is a bias at work here against the idea that God may have created in a series of separate steps (as the biblical text suggests), and a bias in favor of a flow of evolutionary gradualism

without any distinct acts of divine intrusion upon the scene, a view held by many unbelieving scientists. One wonders how far down the road a believer can walk in what seems like a secular world picture.

From what he has written here, would it be unfair to consider Van Till a theistic evolutionist? Perhaps labels are unfair, but in this case I believe it is accurate.

In summary, I think there are some serious problems with Van Till's approach. *I recognize the need to take a new look at our exegesis of the Scriptures in the light of substantially established scientific data.*² We should be open to reconsiderations.³ But it is irresponsible and devilish to twist the Bible into saying what it clearly does not say. In my view, theistic evolutionists face at least two major problems with Scripture: (1) They must ignore the clear teaching of the creation of life in a series of divine creative acts as presented in Genesis 1. To ignore Scripture is wrong in any case (and I want to be emphatic about that), but it is especially disappointing when no compelling observational data would require such an action. (2) If we are going to be faithful to biblical teaching regarding Adam, as found in Genesis and in the statements of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17:26, Romans 5:12ff, etc., there is no way we can view Adam as arising out of an evolutionary process without undermining what the Apostle Paul has to say about the First Adam and the Second Adam. To do so leads to serious doctrinal problems. I would be interested in discovering how Van Till deals with these passages.

I may add that I am personally acquainted with several theistic evolutionists (none of them teaching here at Dordt!) who are sincere Christians and quite likeable. I don't doubt they love the LORD and as far as I can judge, are saved. But they walk away from the doctrinal problems. Their exegesis of Scripture on the two points just cited is seriously deficient. For some passages of the Bible there may be more than one interpretation possible, but not of these. The Bible speaks too clearly on these topics. To pretend otherwise is to play a game of self-deception. Theistic evolution does not come out of a possible and plausible exegesis of Scripture; it is an unwise accommodation to an evolutionary point of view. The theistic evolutionists I have in mind should reconsider the biblical teaching on the subject. I think they should either acknowledge several distinct acts of creation (as Genesis and the

Apostle Paul indicate), or be honest and admit they are rejecting the Reformed doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, and have decided to pick and choose from its pages only what they like. *De facto* they are doing this already, unwittingly, I believe. One must be honest about one's approach to Scripture. I do not know to what extent Van Till has wrestled with this matter.

Finally, we as Christians must love one another in obedience to Christ, even though we may disagree on some very important details. We must reach out in love to others, even though we are convinced their understanding of Scripture is seriously deficient. There is no room in the Gospel (or in the Ninth Commandment) for hatred or smear campaigns. If we must disagree we ought to do so without becoming disagreeable. That is why a conference such as this, involving calm discussions, rather than a confrontational debate, is much to be preferred. We all have something to learn.

At the same time we must take care to be faithful to the teaching of the Prophets and Apostles. It is good that we can address these issues, and I hope that the LORD can give us wisdom!

End Notes

¹I would like to see discussion of some biblical passages establishing these principles. I do not doubt that in a sense they agree with Scripture, but I like to see evidence. My experience with theological liberalism at Union Theological Seminary leads me to insist upon being shown!

²There are many developments in historical geology, paleoanthropology, and astronomy in the past twenty years about which every theologian and informed minister of the Word should be conversant. This is at the heart of Van Till's concern. We have put our head in the sand too long! We are in danger of being viewed as backward by the educated world, and our Christian witness to them is being hindered.

For astronomy, read a basic text like that of George Abell, David Morrison, and Sidney C. Wolff, *Exploration of the Universe*, 5th ed. (1987). Also of value is *The Cambridge Atlas of Astronomy*. For historical geology, read Harold L. Levin, *The Earth through Time* (1988) and/or Steven M. Stanley, *Earth and Life through Time* (1986). For a careful review of fossil evidence

concerning early man, read Kenneth F. Weaver, "The Search for Our Ancestors" in *National Geographic*, November, 1985, 560-623, and Donald Johanson & Maitland Edey, *Lucy: The Beginnings of Humankind* (1981). Both are rather popular and evolutionist-oriented, but deserve study. Then, on a more advanced level, read Michael H. Day, *Guide to Fossil Man*, 4th ed., (1986), a fairly complete survey of hominid fossils. To really understand Van Till's concerns (which should be our con-

cerns also!) one needs to wrestle with the scientific data they present.

³Even Louis Berkhof suggested this years ago before some data were so well established when he said, "If traditional exegesis conflicts, not merely with scientific theories — which are themselves interpretation — but with well established facts, re-thinking and reinterpretation is naturally in order." (*Systematic Theology*, both second (1941) and fourth (1949) editions, both on page 152.)