

"I've Been Framed !" . .

A Study in Academic Positioning

Gary North

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John Frame's long-awaited book on the philosophy of Van Til has arrived: *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995). The book is clear in most of its sections. I appreciate that.

Professor Frame has some kind things to say about me and some critical things. In a footnote, he warns his readers: "I do not, however, recommend another book by North, *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), which I consider extremely confused." That caught my attention.

So did the section, "The Theonomists," which appears in Chapter 28, "Van Til's Successors." He mentions R. J. Rushdoony's *By What Standard?* and Rushdoony's work in developing Christian Reconstruction, but he says nothing critical. This takes two paragraphs. Then he mentions Greg Bahnsen, where he correctly observes that "Bahnsen is the best debater among Christian apologists of all apologetic persuasions." This takes one brief paragraph. He then spends the remainder of the section lambasting *Westminster's Confession*. Why me? Isn't he an equal opportunity lambaster?

Timing and Tactics

Professor Frame writes of me: "He boasts about how little time he spent working on the book, evidently to suggest that the Barker-Godfrey volume was a critical pushover" (p. 392). He's got that right! I wrote:

This book is a refutation of *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (1990), written by the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary. I do not regard either book as a classic. My book is what some people will call a "quickie." The Westminster book is, too, but it took about five years to get it into print; mine will take about five months. . . . So, it is hardly a great book. It does not have to be a great book. It just has to be better than *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*.

"I wrote it in about a month. He complains: 'I think he' would have been better served to take more time on the project," This is the comment of an academician with tenure and a lot of spare time on his hands, not a movement leader who has to respond to a poorly researched and poorly executed attack on what he and his followers have committed their lives to.

I had to act fast. There is an old saying, "A false rumor circles the globe three times before the truth makes it to the front door." I knew that the anti-theonomic world of academic theology had been waiting for over 15 years for a scholarly critique of theonomy. I knew how fast Westminster's book would be heralded in obscure Christian journals as a definitive refutation of theonomy (which did happen). My job was to get the following message out to friends and foes alike: "Theonomy's critics will have to wait a bit longer for their academic deliverance."

Their book was an amazingly inept academic performance. The authors were not agreed on the reasons for rejecting theonomy; some of these reasons were contradictory. The book reminded me of an old Keystone Cops comedy: guys frantically running around, banging into each other, and

completely missing their target.

To refute it, I wrote *Westminster's Confession*, hired Bahnsen to write *No Other Standard*, and edited the collection titled, *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, all published in 1991. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* is today out of print, or as this condition is sometimes described in the Christian book publishing trade, "The Lord called it home." In contrast, you can still buy all three copies of ICE'S defensive responses for a terrific discount price of \$20. (Order from ICE, P. O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. Ask for the Westminster vs. **theonomy** collection.)

What was the thesis of *Westminster's Confession*? According to Prof. Frame, it was this:

done Van Til's legacy by (1) failing to hire Greg Bahnsen to replace Van Til, (2) firing Norman Shepherd, and (3) producing the Barker-Godfrey critique of theonomy (p. 393).

He then devotes a paragraph to Shepherd's firing and eight lines to Bahnsen's non-hiring. End of section. He goes on to "Other Van Tillians."

I know I shouldn't do this. I cry out, "Stop me before I sloganize again." But I cannot resist. And so I say:

When it comes to **summarizing** the theological issue at stake here, John **Robbins** would have been more accurate.

There! I've said it, it's out of my system now. Let's move on, Is *Westminster's Confession* confused? Or is Prof. Frame trying to mislead his readers? Consider the evidence.

Jerusalem vs. Athena

I began my book, as usual, with a Foreword. This Foreword briefly traced the history of the surrender of Calvinism to Enlightenment humanism after 1660, the year that Charles II was forced to accept the **Bill of Rights**, the demise of the Puritan Revolution in England. I wrote that Enlightenment humanists had stolen five ideas from the Puritans and had then secularized them. The sovereignty of God became the sovereignty of man; the ideal of the priesthood of all believers became the ideal of modern democracy; Calvinism's view of the law of God in governing the world became humanism's faith in the impersonal laws of science; the idea of God's sanctions in history became the idea of free market causation; and Puritanism's eschatological optimism became the idea of inevitable progress in history. Then these secularized ideas were then re-imported by the Calvinists in the name of common-ground rationalism: specifically, Newtonianism. But Isaac Newton was a unitarian. His view of cause and effect did not require any appeal to the Bible. I ended my Foreword:

What Westminster Seminary has done is a representative example of a much larger process that has been going on for well over three centuries. It is a case study of how the intellectual leadership of Calvinism refuses to adopt the heritage that God has graciously given to Calvinists, and only to Calvinists. Instead, the leaders return

again and again to the fleshpots of academic Egypt. They also allow their enemies to set the covenantal war's agenda. Worse; they submit to certification by their enemies before they even begin to do battle. This has been going on from the very beginning of Calvinism. It is time to call a halt to the process. *Westminster's Confession* is a warning to Calvinist leaders of the future: "Just say no."

I concluded with these words: "Cornelius Van Til taught us how to say no. Let us follow his good example."

What has Van Til got to do with it? This: he presented the Christian academic world with a revolutionary idea. Not many people ever launch an intellectual revolution, but Van Til did. He broke with 1,800 years of Christian philosophical defenses of the faith. He said that there has been an illegitimate importation of alien ideas into Christianity. He labeled these alien ideas: Athens. These ideas all begin with a presupposition: the autonomy of man's mind and its sole authority in establishing truth. Man, not God, is sovereign. Man's word, not the Bible, is authoritative. This, Van Til said, is incompatible with Christianity. There is no place for Athens in Jerusalem. We must begin with two presuppositions: God, the Trinitarian Creator, and the infallibility of the Bible.

For saying this, Van Til was pilloried by his Christian academic peers. He had called them to account before the bar of Scripture and only Scripture, and they refused to be called to account. What my book argued is that the faculty of Westminster Seminary also refuses to be called to account by Van Til.

So far, are you confused?

But was I correct? Has Westminster Seminary abandoned Van Til? Frame denies that it has. I will do my best here to show why he is wrong.

"If Not Biblical Law, Then What?"

Van Til challenged the intellectual world to come to grips with the question of neutrality, both philosophical and ethical. He asked: Can any man think neutrally? Can he examine any fact objectively? Is any fact objective in the humanist's sense, i.e., autonomous from everything except the space-time continuum? Van Til called this "brute factuality," and he said it is entirely mythical. Every fact is a created fact. The Creator interprets it comprehensively and exhaustively, for the Creator is infinite, and the creation is not. Basically, Van Til said that God comes before every aspect of creation and announces, "I'm God and you're not . . . and you never will be."

Anyone who rejects this claim—Van Til's claim on behalf of God—should ask himself a question: By what standard? Better put: "By what standard other than the Bible?" It is this question that the faculty of Westminster Seminary and every other Protestant-funded institution of humanist-certified higher learning refuse to answer. They have all signed a non-aggression treaty with Athens: accreditation. The results of this treaty, though unfortunately not its history, are surveyed in George M. Marsden's book, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford University Press, 1994). (It is worth noting here that Marsden studied apologetics under Van Til.)

Van Til spent his academic career refuting natural revelation theology. His arguments destroyed the possibility of natural law theory. Yet natural law theory has undergirded Western political theory from the days of the Roman Stoics, especially that hybrid known as religiously neutral political pluralism, first proposed by Rhode Island Baptist Roger Williams and adopted by Christian political philosophers after 1687 in the name of Newtonian rationalism.

If Van Til was correct, then the Newtonian-unitarian worldview, which rests logically on the reliability of the natural man's autonomous observations and interpretations, has to be wrong. Yet Newtonianism undergirded modern democratic political pluralism until the advent of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin.

Pluralism is mythical, Marx taught, because civil government is nothing but the ruling class's means of oppressing its enemies. Neutrality is a bourgeois myth. Darwin was not interested in politics, but his intellectual heirs understood what he had wrought: the destruction of natural law as a fixed standard for biology. All biological laws are subject to evolutionary transformation. So are all social laws, they concluded. Humanists have long since abandoned the myth of neutrality; meanwhile, Christian academics cling to it in their search for social relevance.

Van Til made it clear: (1) there can be no neutrality, (2) the autonomy of the universe is a covenant-breaking myth, and (3) the autonomy of man's mind is equally a covenant-breaking myth. This means that natural law is a myth. There are laws of nature, for God is in control, and He has made man's mind to comprehend the regularities of nature. But fallen man is in sin. There are noetic effects of sin, Van Til taught: *distorting effects* on what man knows and how he knows it. Man observes reality through tinted glasses, he said: glasses whose prescription was written either by God or by Satan.

We come now to the place where the presuppositional rubber meets the humanist-accredited seminary road. We come to co-editor William Barker's position on natural law. Here is how I summarized Barker's position in 1991:

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Then whose law should reign in civil government? Not God's Bible-revealed law. We are back to natural law theory, just where it all began under Roger Williams in the 1640's, But no one [on Westminster's faculty] wants to say this openly, since they all suspect the truth: *there is no such thing as neutral natural law*. So they do not tell us what law-order they want. It is an open question. It is an open question that they do not intend to close. *They remain judicially agnostic*. They say yes to Van Til, and then say *no* to the inescapable political implications of his position. Here is my case against Westminster: proclaiming Van Til, they reject Van Til. So did Van Til [on biblical law], but he wisely avoided discussing politics. His successors at Westminster do not. None is more forthright in his rejection than Barker. For this forthrightness he should be praised. He makes his position clear:

If it is indeed not our King's intention for the civil authority to enforce the first great commandment, then among the five alternatives that Bahnsen offers as possible standards for civil law, natural revelation as indeed "a sin-obsured edition of the same law of God "suppressed in unrighteousness by the sinner" [Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, pp. 399-400] is that to which we must appeal—on the basis of our own knowledge of special revelation and with the intent of bringing more of the unbelieving population to repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the way Paul operated in the Roman Empire and the way any Christian must operate in a missionary situation.

Is this how Paul used natural revelation? Not at Mars hill! He used some references in Greek poetry to tell them that everything they had learned about God from natural revelation

was wrong. God would put up with their nonsense no longer. Then he warned them of the coming judgment

Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter (Acts 17:29-32).

God would no longer wink at such ignorance, Paul announced. But Barker wants to make such cursed ignorance the basis of our appeal to the natural man until such time as we Christians are a majority, i.e., in a "non-missionary" situation. Therefore, natural law *is that to which we must appeal*. There it is, in black and white, This is Westminster's csmfessiq- in the words of the book's co-editor.

Barker states: "This is the way Paul operated in the Roman Empire and the way any Christian must operate in a minority situation." Let us explore this "minority situation" idea. Question: To what should Christians appeal when we are no longer a minority? This distinctly postmillennial question is the one that Barker and his pluralist and amillennialist colleagues steadfastly refuse to answer in print. If he says "theonomy," then he has given up his pluralist theology. Christian pluralism then loses its status as a serious political philosophy; it becomes merely a tactic, a pragmatic con job to fool the covenant-breakers until such time as we Christians get the votes. On the other hand, if he says "natural law," then he is trapped: his appeal to our present minority status as the basis of our need to appeal to natural law is revealed as a rhetorical con job to fool the followers of Van Til. So, he is trying to fool either the pagans or the Vantilians. I think it is the latter (pp. 227-29) .

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Barker was forthright. He openly abandoned Van Til's rejection of natural law theory. He openly abandoned VanTil's intellectual legacy. The other contributors in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* were not equally forthright. In fact, they were downright evasive. They played a game of hide and go seek with the readers. They refused to say exactly what it was they were offering in place of Van Til's rejection of natural law theory. Professor Frame still refuses, even in a book on Van Til.

This was the heart, mind, and soul of my thesis in *Westminster's Confession*. This was why I added the subtitle: *The Abandonment of VanTil's Legacy*. I did not argue or imply that Van Til was a theonomist. I argued rather that he opposed natural law theory, which Barker and several of the contributors had invoked against theonomy, either explicitly or implicitly. That anyone who had read the book could fail to understand my argument seems remarkable. That any reader who teaches philosophy and ethics could fail to understand it seems preposterous.

Are you getting less confused?

Recall Prof. Frame's summary of my book: "In short, his argument is that Westminster abandoned Van Til's legacy by (1) failing to hire Greg Bahnsen to replace Van Til, (2) firing Norman Shepherd, and (3) producing the Barker-Godfrey

critique of theonomy." This is rhetorically clever. But rhetoric in the absence of logic is, as the British say, too clever by half.

What he has done is to reduce a battle over philosophical principle to a battle over personalities. When a trained philosopher substitutes rhetoric for logic, he is trying to hide something important a vulnerable area of his case. By **presenting** only rhetoric, he **trivializes** his case. This is what Prof. Frame has done,

He asks what he imagines is a rhetorical question: "If Van Til was not a theonomist, how can the rejection of theonomy be considered an abandonment of Van Til's legacy?" Instead of pursuing this question, he drops the whole subject and goes on to "Other Van Tillians." in the space remaining, I will give him my answer. He and his colleagues will not like it. Maybe they will even answer me in print some day. But I doubt it.

Van TM's **Defensive Legacy: Tunnel Vision**

In my book, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Neutrality* (ICE, 1989), I devoted Chapter 3 to answering Prof. Frame's question, at least indirectly. I titled it, "Halfway Covenant Ethics." It is a detailed critique of VanTil's position on biblical law and eschatology. Unfortunately, Prof. Frame neglected to mention this book or any of its arguments. I regard this as more than a little suspicious, though surely clever.

Van Til destroyed the intellectual foundation of pluralism's political theory when he destroyed the case for natural theology and therefore natural law, but he offered nothing in its place. Here is what I wrote in Chapter 3 of *Political Polytheism* in the subsection, "Blowing Up the Cultural Dike."

He was a Dutchman. He should have understood what he was doing. He was like a demolitions expert who places explosives at the base of a dike and triggers an explosion. This is what he did at the base of the incomparably leaky dike of natural law theory. But Van Til never publicly asked himself this crucial question: "After the dike of natural law is shattered, what will take its place?" Even more to the point, "Should I build a back-up dike before I blowup the existing one?" VanTil never offered any answers to these crucial questions. He had no recommendations regarding Church or civil legal standards. He apparently believed that it was not his job to provide such answers, as if natural law philosophy had not stood for almost two millennia as virtually the sole foundation of Christian political theory. All he ever wanted to do academically was blow up theologically inconsistent leaky dikes. He built no restraining wall. The only reliable materials available for building such a wall are the biblical case laws, found mostly in the Old Testament, and VanTil refused to use them. But the pagan sea of ethical nihilism always threatens to rush in with full force to carry away the last traces of Christian civilization (p. 112).

To avoid encountering this obvious criticism—a criticism that Westminster's faculty steadfastly pretends is not there—he self-consciously refused for over fifty years to enter into a discussion of any academic topic outside the narrow field of apologetics. He wrote no social criticism, no social philosophy, no manifesto on any relevant contemporary issue. This is why Van Til never published anything against theonomy, Christian Reconstruction, Rushdoony, North, or Bahnsen. This was consistent with his career's positioning: tunnel vision, "**apologetics** only." On apologetics, we agreed with him. He refused

to comment on anything else.

Prof. Frame and his colleagues broke with this tradition in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. They came out of their defensive academic bunker, yelled that theonomy is all wrong, or mostly wrong, or sort of wrong, or incomplete, and then ran back inside to hide. This was not Van Til's legacy. Van Til's legacy was to stake out a technical field and defend it against all comers. But he was always careful to restrict his defensive perimeter: technical apologetics. He never ventured out of this safety zone.

Why not? It is obvious to me, though not to Prof. Frame, Van Til could not recommend social alternatives because he rejected both natural law and biblical case laws. He was intellectually paralyzed by his self-imposed position of "neither/nor." He recognized the logical trap at the edge of his defensive perimeter: "You can't best something with nothing." He was content to remain socially mute, despite the fact that his demolition work had devastated his non-theonomic successors' moral and intellectual position.

Saul's Armor

David refused Saul's offer to lend him his ill-fitting armor. Instead, he took his sling and picked up five stones. He only needed one.

Natural law theory is the intellectual equivalent of Saul's armor. Any would-be David who wears it into battle begins with a severe handicap. Like David, Van Til refused to wear it. He carried only a sling: the Bible. But because he rejected theonomy's hermeneutic, he refused to pick up any stones: case law applications. Partially disarmed, he challenged only those opponents whom he could strangle with his sling. He strangled a lot of them,

Since 1990, Westminster's faculty has had a very big problem. Its members want to become socially relevant, unlike the first generation of faculty members after Machen's death in 1937. That generation remained conspicuously silent on social and economic issues. They understood that they could say nothing socially relevant without invoking either biblical law or natural law. They said almost nothing in print. The one major exception was John Murray in his *Principles of Conduct* (1957). In it, he spoke out for "the sanctity of human life" (p. 122)-as close to an anti-abortion statement as could be expected in 1957.

The new generation has now gone on record as opposing theonomy. This has reduced their options to two: (1) say nothing socially relevant: (2) invoke natural law. The first decision would be consistent with Van Til's defensive legacy; the second violates it. Today's faculty has openly violated Van Til's legacy in two ways: speaking out on social issues and invoking natural law. This is so obvious that it takes an advanced degree in philosophy to miss it. Professor Frame missed it.

For decades, the faculty has played deaf and dumb whenever it comes time to challenge Philistia: de-funding government education, recommending criminal penalties against abortion, or defending the six-day creation. In fact, some faculty members have openly joined the Philistine on these issues.

The faculty today is like David's oldest brother Eliab: resentful of David's willingness to fight Goliath. Since the late 1960's, they have viewed theonomy's attacks on Philistia as implicit criticisms of their own complacency, their life in the bunker. So, in 1990, they attacked the would-be Davids: theonomists in general and Bahnsen in particular. Barker led them into battle-actually, a brief skirmish-wearing Saul's armor. Here was Eliab's platoon! All except Moises Silva shouted a challenge to David. So, I paid David to write *No*

Other Standard. Predictably, the platoon retreated after about five minutes in the field. Maybe only three.

In *Westminster's Confession*, I announced: "Look, everyone: their captain, Barker ben Jesse, is wearing Saul's armor; so are half of the platoon's members, hidden under their robes. All the others are unarmed. Not one of them is carrying a stone. They attacked David from behind as he marched into battle toward Goliath. What kind of platoon is this, anyway?" Loyal platoon member that he is, Prof. Frame refused to inform his readers of the nature of my criticism of Westminster's platoon: warriors without any atones.

I'll bet you aren't confused any more.

Conclusion

With *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, Westminster's faculty abandoned Van Til's legacy of self-imposed silence. They tried, very briefly, to become intellectually relevant off-campus. But they faced an insurmountable problem. First, to adopt Van Til's presuppositional, Bible-only apologetics, you must abandon natural law theory. Second, to be socially relevant by means of a Christian worldview, you must offer specific, real-world, explicitly biblical answers to the inevitable question: "How should we then live?" You cannot do both without adopting **theonomy's hermeneutic**.

This is why Westminster has yet to go on record as opposing abortion as even a misdemeanor, let alone a capital crime, i.e., murder. Rushdoony, Bahnsen, and North did, over two decades ago. As Presbyterian ministers, Westminster's faculty formally have sworn to defend the Westminster Confession's affirmation of the six-day creation (IV:1), but they have refused even to teach it, let alone defend it. Meredith G. Kline openly repudiates it. Rushdoony, Bahnsen, and North are six-day creationists. This has annoyed Westminster. Though we never challenged Westminster in print, our mere presence was a testimony against the school because it has remained as mute as a hand-carved idol on the dominant social and moral issues of our day.

The anomaly of their position eventually got to them. They tried briefly to become relevant. They attacked theonomy. This forced them to adopt natural law theory, which co-editor Barker did for them representatively. The others remained discreetly silent regarding the philosophical basis of their attack, pretending that they were not caught in a trap of their own making: **social** relevance without biblical law. Van Til always knew where this trap was located-in plain sight-and he never stepped into it. They openly abandoned his tradition of silence on matters of law and civilization.

In *Westminster's Confession*, I identified their adoption of natural law theory as the abandonment of Van Til's legacy. Given Prof. Frame's decision not to mention this fact in his summary of my book, I surmise that my accusation has annoyed them. They are too easily annoyed. They are annoyed by: (1) six-day creationism, (2) the "abortion is murder" conclusion, (3) biblical law, (4) postmillennialism, (5) the ideal of Christendom, (6) the moral necessity of Christian social relevance. In short, what Rev. Ken Gentry calls the greatness of the Great Commission annoys them. They prefer life in the cultural bunker.

Once again, I say to Westminster's faculty: "Put up or shut up; fish or cut bait." If not biblical law, then what? If their answer is "natural law," then they have abandoned Van Til's intellectual legacy. Only if their answer is a renewed vow of cultural silence can they reclaim Van Til's second, defensive legacy: tunnel vision. But the price of retaining this aspect of his legacy is life in the bunker. They must surrender civilization to others. In short, they can't beat something with nothing, Especially theonomy.