The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics

I. Introduction

That self-deception which is practiced by all unregenerate men according to the Apostle Paul's incisive description in Rom 1:18ff. is at once religiously momentous and yet philosophically enigmatic. It is also one of the focal points in continuing criticism of Cornelius Van Til’s apologetic and, as such, invites analysis with a view to supplementing and strengthening the saintly professor’s remarkable contribution to the history of apologetics.

Paul asserts that all men know God so inescapably and clearly from natural revelation that they are left with no defense for their unfaithful response to the truth about him. In vv. 19–20, Paul says that “what can be known about God is plain within them because God made it plain to them...[being] clearly perceived from the created world, being intellectually apprehended from the things that have been made...so that they are without excuse.” Nevertheless, even as they are categorically depicted as “knowing God” (v. 21), all men are portrayed in their unrighteousness as “holding down the truth” (v. 18). They are suppressing what God has already successfully shown them about himself. As a result of hiding the truth from themselves, unbelievers neither glorify nor thank God, but instead become futile in their reasoning, undiscerning in their darkened hearts, and foolish in the midst of their professions of wisdom (vv. 21–22). According to God’s word through Paul, then, unbelievers suppress what they very well know, confirming what Jeremiah the prophet so aptly declared, “The heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer 17:9).

The apologetical importance of such self-deception should be quite evident. Throughout the history of apologetics we find that Romans 1 has been of guiding interest to biblically oriented apologists, and indeed the self-deceptive character of man as presented there has itself been stressed periodically by scholars of Reformed persuasion. However, no apologist has drawn more consistent attention to this characteristic of the natural man or made it more pivotal for his system of defending the Christian faith than has Dr. Van Til. It is an indispensable concept in his epistle...

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