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Van Til, Cornelius. Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) was born in Holland, emigrated to the United States as a child, and grew up on a farm in Indiana. He attended Calvin College and Princeton Seminary. After pastoring a Michigan church, he was professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary from its founding in 1929 till his retirement in 1972. Francis Schaeffer was among students who adopted a form of presuppositionalism under his influence.

His views on apologetics are expressed in *The Defense of the Faith* (1955; rev. 1963); *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (1967); *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (1969); *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (1969); *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (1969); *The Great Debate Today* (1971); *The Defense of Christianity and My Credo* (1971); *Common Grace and the Gospel* (1972); *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (1974); *Christian Apologetics* (1975); *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (1976); and two undated works, *Why I Believe in God,* which is Van Til's summary of his own view. Other significant writings include an introduction to an edition of B. B. Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* , and an essay, "My Credo" in E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens* (1971).

Philosophy of Apologetics. In a succinct statement of his own views, Van Til divided his philosophy of apologetics into three major areas: "My problem with the 'traditional method,' " "my understanding of the relationship between Christian and non-Christian, philosophically speaking," and "my proposal for a consistently Christian methodology of apologetics."

"Traditional" Apologetics. Van Til found seven problems in classical apologetics:

1.   It compromises God by maintaining that his existence is only "possible," albeit "highly probable," rather than ontologically and "rationally" necessary.

2.   It compromises the counsel of God by not understanding it as the only all-inclusive, ultimate "cause" of whatsoever comes to pass.

3.   It compromises the revelation of God in its necessity, its clarity, its sufficiency, and its authority.

4.   It compromises human creation as the image-bearer of God by conceptualizing human creation and knowledge as independent of the Being and knowledge of God. Human beings need not "think God's thoughts after him."

5.   It compromises humanity's covenantal relationship with God by not understanding Adam's representative action as absolutely determinative of the future.

6.   It compromises the sinfulness resulting from the sin of Adam by not understanding ethical depravity as extending to the whole of life, even to thoughts and attitudes.

7.   It compromises the grace of God by not understanding it as the necessary prerequisite for "renewal unto knowledge." On the traditional view men and women must renew themselves unto knowledge by the "right use of reason."

Christian and Non-Christian Together. Van Til makes four basic points about the relationship of faith and reason. Each reveals something about the nature of his apologetic approach.

1. Both have presuppositions about the nature of reality: (a) The Christian presupposes a triune God and his redemptive plan for the universe as set forth once for all in Scripture. (b) The non-Christian presupposes a dialectic between "chance" and "regularity," the former accounting for the origin of matter and life, the latter accounting for the current success of the scientific enterprise.

2. Neither Christian nor unbeliever can, as finite beings, use logic to say what reality *must* or *cannot* be. (a) The Christian attempts to understand the world through observation and logically ordering facts. This is done in self-conscious subjection to the plan of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. (b) The non-Christian, while attempting to understand through observation, at tempts to use logic to destroy the Christian position. Appealing to the *nonrationality* of "matter," the unbeliever says that the chance-character of "facts" witnesses conclusively against the Christian worldview. Then the non-Christian maintains that the Christian story cannot possibly be true. Each human being must be autonomous. "Logic" must legislate what is "possible" and possibility must exclude God.

3. Both claim that their position is "in accordance with the facts": (a) The Christian claims this on the basis of experience in the light of the revelation of the self-attesting Christ in Scripture. Both the uniformity and the diversity of facts have at their foundation the all-embracing plan of God. (b) The non-Christian claims this after interpreting the facts and personal experience in the light of human autonomy. The unbeliever rests upon the ultimate "givenness" of the world and the amenability of matter to mind. No fact can deny human autonomy or attest to a divine origin of the world and humanity.

4. Both claim that their position is "rational." (a) The Christian claims the faith position is self-consistent. The seemingly inexplicable can be explained through rational logic and the information available in Scripture. (b) The non-Christian may or may not claim that facts are totally self-consistent and in accord with the ultimate rationality of the cosmos. One who does

claim total self-consistency will be crippled when it comes to explaining naturalistic "evolution." If rational beings and a rational world sprang from pure chance and ultimate irrationality, such an explanation is in fact no explanation. A basis in irrational chance destroys predication.

A Consistently Apologetic Method. Van Til's own positive view proposes:

1.   that we use the same principle in apologetics that we use in theology—the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture.

2.   that we no longer appeal to "common notions" on which Christian and non-Christian can agree. Their "common ground" is that each person and each person's world are what Scripture says they are.

3.   that we appeal to human beings as God's image-bearer. To do so we set the non-Christian's rational autonomy against Christian dependence. Human knowledge depends on God's knowledge, as revealed in the person and by the Spirit of Christ.

4.   that we claim, therefore, that Christianity alone is reasonable. It is wholly irrational to hold any other position than that of Christianity. Christianity alone does not slay reason on the altar of "chance."

5.   that we argue, therefore, by "presupposition." The Christian, as did Tertullian, must contest the very principles of an opponent's position. The only "proof" of the Christian position is that, unless its truth is presupposed, there is no possibility of "proving" anything. The state of affairs proclaimed by Christianity is the necessary foundation for "proof" itself.

6.   that we preach with the understanding that acceptance of the Christ of Scripture comes about only as the Holy Spirit uses inescapably clear evidence to open a fleeing sinner's eyes to see things as they truly are.

7.   that we present the message and evidence for the Christian position as clearly as possible. Because a human being is what the Christian says he or she is, the non-Christian can understand intellectually the issues involved. To an extent, the Christian message tells what the unbeliever already knows but seeks to suppress. This reminder provides a fertile ground for the Holy Spirit. According to God's sovereign grace the Spirit may grant the non-Christian repentance and knowledge of him who is life eternal.

Revelational Presuppositionalism. *Rejection of Classical Apologetics.* Van Til rejects classical apologetics, which he calls the "traditional" method. In its place he substitutes a presuppositional apologetics. He believes the classical apologetics of Thomas Aquinas is based on human autonomy. "There is on this basis no genuine point of contact with the mind of the natural man at all. . . . The revelation of a self-sufficient God can have no meaning for a mind that thinks of itself as ultimately autonomous." The problem is "how it may be known that the God of reason and the God of faith are the same" (*In Defense of the Faith* , 73, 94, 127). He described the Thomistic method as "a position half way between that of Christianity and that of

paganism." Theistic arguments are invalid and, at any rate, they do not lead to the "self-contained ontological trinity of Scripture." Thomistic apologetics reduces the Gospel through rationalism as to make it acceptable to the natural man" (*Great Debate Today* , 91).

He insisted that unless the God of the Bible is the foundation of human experience, experience operates in a void (*Common Grace and the Gospel* , 192). So Van Til begins with the Triune God and his self-revelation in Holy Scripture. Thus, his position has been called *revelational* presuppositionalism.

Van Til's Apologetic Method. The method of implication. Early in his career, Van Til called his apologetic a "method of implication" (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology* , 6–10; 201–2). John Frame said the phrase suggested to Van Til a combination inductive and deductive approach. The general has priority over the particular (*Cornelius Van Til* , 311).

Reasoning by presupposition. In his later writings Van Til typically calls his method "reasoning by presupposition" (ibid., 312). He asserted that "To argue by presupposition is to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method." The issues cannot be settled by appealing to mutually-agreed-upon "facts" or "laws." The worldviews are too far apart for that. What must be searched out on both sides is a final reference-point that can make the facts and laws intelligible (*In Defense of the Faith* , 99, 100).

Van Til's reference point is so Scripture-dependent that it has been called " *revelational* presuppositionalism." He rejects the *rational* presuppositionalism of Gordon Clark , believing that his stress on the law of noncontradiction is not subservient to God's sovereignty. Likewise, Van Til disagreed with Edward J. Carnell 's presuppositionalism, known as *systematic coherency* . Systematic coherency combines the law of noncontradiction, factual evidence, and existential adequacy as tests for truth.

Indirect method. Van Til described the method as "indirect" to distinguish it from "direct" classical evidential arguments. It was indirect because it showed the truth of Christianity by showing the contradiction in opposing views. An opponent's position is reduced to an absurdity. Frame adds that this suggests "a model like that of the indirect argument in mathematics. In that model, one proves a proposition by assuming the opposite" (*Cornelius Van Til* , 313–14).

External and internal method. Van Til's apologetic method is both external and internal. He argues:

    We should address the unbeliever always from our own presuppositional commitment. From that commitment, however, we may legitimately examine the unbeliever's presuppositions and tell him our evaluation of them, how they look from our point of view. . . . this criticism is "external" in the sense of being based on criteria outside the unbeliever's own system of thought. . . . But it can become "internal" in another sense, when we ask the unbeliever how, even from his own point of view, he is able to account for the intelligibility of the world. . . . Our criticism will never be purely internal, purely from the unbeliever's point of view; it will always be external in the

sense that it is determined by the Christian point of view. Otherwise, we would be . . . drowning with the one we would rescue." [ibid., 322]

ᴛ ranscendental. Those familiar with Immanuel Kant understand a transcendental argument. Van Til also affirmed that "the method of implication may also be called a *transcendental method* . . . . A truly transcendental argument takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be, in order to make it what it is." The transcendental argument seeks a foundational epistemology for knowledge. Van Til observes that this always presupposes that a foundation does, in fact, exist (*Survey of Christian Epistemology* , 10, 11).

Robert Knudsen, in his essay "Progressive and Regressive Tendencies in Christian Apologetics" (in *Jerusalem and Athens*), noted that the transcendental method gained ascendancy after David Hume undermined the traditional methodology. Greg Bahnsen defended the transcendental method in his essay "the Reformation of Christian Apologetics" (in North, 191–239). However, Van Til never really spelled out how his transcendental argument actually works. Nonetheless, he claimed that "the only argument for an absolute God that holds water is a transcendental argument" (*In Defense of the Faith* , 11; *see* Sᴄʜᴀᴇꜰꜰᴇʀ, Fʀᴀɴᴄɪꜱ on his use of the transcendental argument).

Van Til said that both inductive and deductive arguments are bound to the universe. "In either case there is no more than an infinite regression." It is always possible to ask, "If God made the universe, who made God?" Yet unless there were an absolute God the very questions and doubts of the skeptic would have no meaning. At some point every epistemological base depends on the existence of God. The transcendental argument seeks to discover that presupposed foundation (*Survey of Christian Epistemology* , 11). Thus, transcendentalism and presuppositionalism are one. For, according to Van Til, it is transcendentally necessary to presuppose that a triune God (*see* Tʀɪɴɪᴛʏ) revealed in Holy Scripture in order to make any sense of the world. Without this necessary presupposition, no thought or meaning is possible.

The reductio ad absurdum method. Frame recognized three elements in this method: First, it seeks to show that all intelligibility depends on, or presupposes, Christian theism. Second, it is indirect rather than direct, negative rather than positive, essentially a *reductio ad absurdum* . Third, each participant in the discussion must be able to put on the opposing position for the sake of argument to see how it works (*Cornelius Van Til* , 314–15). According to Frame, "The unbeliever supplies the premises of the indirect argument, the premises which the believer then reduces to absurdity" (ibid., 315). Once the unbeliever supplies the premise of the indirect argument, the believer shows that it entails the rational-irrationalist dialectic. The unbeliever's system inevitably applies purely abstract laws to irrational facts. Rational thought is impossible.

Two things happen in the use of the method: The Christian assumes the correctness of the opposing method, then runs it to its final implications to show that its "facts" are not facts and "laws" are not laws. The non-Christian is asked to assume the Christian position for argument's sake and is shown that only these "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible" (*In Defense of the Faith* , 100–101). It is pointed out that "the non-Christian himself refutes his own irrationalism, for despite his philosophy he continues to live as if the world were a rational place. Thus, the

unbeliever's own mind is part of God's revelation, witnessing against his irrationalist defense" (*Cornelius Van Til* , 322).

Key Concepts. An understanding of Van Til's approach depends on the meaning of certain key concepts:

God's Sovereignty. Van Til is first and foremost a Reformed theologian. Apart from God's sovereign control of the universe and his revelation to us we would know absolutely nothing. Facts and laws are what they are because of God's plan. God's decree "is the final and exclusively determining power of whatsoever comes to pass." It is the source (*In Defense of the Faith* , 11; *Christian Apologetics* , 11; *Introduction to Systematic Theology* , 247).

Common Ground. Since all truth is God's and nothing makes sense apart from him, there is no common intellectual epistemological foundation to share with unbelievers. In place of that foundation we set the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture. We no longer appeal to common ground, but to the real common ground that every human being is an image-bearer who is doing business with God at some level.

Brute Facts. A "brute fact" is a fact that is meaningless because it is uninterpreted by God. It represents a universe of pure chance. Brute facts assume human autonomy and take their starting point outside God's sovereign revelation of himself. Van Til affirms that Christians should appeal to *God-interpreted* facts, but never to brute facts (Van Til, *Christian-Theist Evidences* , 51, 57; Frame, *Cornelius Van Til* , 180).

Because of his presuppositional starting point, it is sometimes wrongly assumed that Van Til does not believe in the validity of traditional historical apologetics (*see* Hɪꜱᴛᴏʀɪᴄᴀʟ Aᴘᴏʟᴏɢᴇᴛɪᴄꜱ). He says, "I would engage in historical apologetics." Historical investigation sooner or later will vindicate the truth of the Christian position. "But I would not talk endlessly about the facts and more facts without ever challenging the unbeliever's philosophy of fact. A really fruitful historical apologetic argues that every fact *is* and *must be* such as proves the truth of the truth of the Christian position" (*Christian Theory of Knowledge* , 293). All facts must be interpreted within the framework of the presupposed Christian worldview revealed in the Bible or they are tainted by their rejection of God's revelation.

Human Depravity. As a result of Adam's sin the human race is radically depraved and so sees everything with a twisted perspective, a "jaundiced eye." Being "dead" in sins, fallen human beings are unable to accurately "know" anything in its context of reality until the Holy Spirit opens their eyes in the process of salvation. With John Calvin , Van Til balances a recognition of God's common grace to the unbeliever with a view that sin vitiates the unbeliever's mind. Even the most learned non-Christian scientist cannot truly understand reality (*In Defense of the Faith* , chap. 15). "The natural man cannot will to do God's will. He cannot even know what is good" (ibid., 54). The noetic effects of sin are total and devastating.

Analogy and Paradox. Even a regenerate mind only knows God's knowledge by analogy. At no point is our knowledge univocal with God's. Whenever the creature attempts to understand divine reality it runs into "paradoxes" or apparent contradictions. Van Til argues that "since God

is not fully comprehensible to us we are bound to come into what seems to be contradiction in all our knowledge. Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical" (*In Defense of the Faith* , 61). God is so sovereignly transcendent above human understanding that it would be blasphemous for us to suppose that we can know the way God knows. Even our supernaturally enlightened knowledge is only analogous to God's. This view of the mind constantly keeps two ideas to the front, the distinction between Creator and creature and (2) the sovereignty of Creator over creature (*Cornelius Van Til* , 89). For these reasons our knowledge must be analogical. Our knowledge is derived from the original knowledge in God's thinking. The human must attempt to think God's thoughts after him. "But this means that he must, in seeking to form his own system, constantly be subject to the authority of God's system *to the extent* that this is revealed to him" (*Christian Theory of Knowledge* , 16).

Evaluation. Positive Contributions. Few apologists have more forthrightly and courageously stressed the sovereignty of God than has Van Til. Unless God sovereignly wills to reveal himself, we would be in complete ignorance. Revelation, whether general or special, is the source of all truth.

While some apologetic systems give begrudging recognition to man's finitude, few give explicit acknowledgment to human depravity and the inability associated with depravity. Sin does have an effect on the whole person, including the mind. Van Til saw this as clearly as has any apologist.

Van Til defended the formal laws of logic in principle and practice. He believed the laws of logic were the same for both the Creator and creatures. However, formally because of sin they are not understood or applied in the same way. He was not an irrationalist.

Van Til offered a strong argument for Christianity. He regarded it as "proof" and chided other views for weakening their defense to mere "probable" arguments.

It seems proper to acknowledge that there is validity to a transcendental approach. What is often described as a self-defeating argument is strikingly similar to Van Til's approach. There are certain rationally necessary preconditions for meaning, and they do, as Van Til argued, demand that we posit the existence of a theistic God.

Van Til believed in historical evidence, and even devoted a book, *Christian-Theist Evidences* , to it. Unlike fellow Reformed apologist (but personal antagonist), Gordon Clark, Van Til was not an empirical skeptic. He believed in the validity of historic evidence for Christianity. But only as understood from the presupposition of biblical revelation.

Also, unlike Clark, Van Til correctly saw that our knowledge of God is only analogous (*see* ANALOGY, PRINCIPLE OF). To believe otherwise is presumptuous, if not blasphemous. For finite beings can know only in a finite way. To affirm that they know infinitely, as does God, is to deify our knowledge.

Often overlooked by nonpresuppositionalists is the practical value of a presuppositional approach. Non-Christians do implicitly (and even unconsciously) presuppose the basic principles of a theistic worldview in order to make sense out of the world. Pointing this out debunks their world view and invites them to consider the positive value of the Christian worldview. No doubt Schaeffer's effectiveness in doing this is a result of his study under Van Til.

Negatives in Van Til's Apologetics. Some criticisms of Van Til seem to be based on misunderstanding, but others appear to be valid.

Even staunch defenders such as John Frame, while defending the general validity of Van Til's method, admit that he goes too far in demanding that all apologetic argument fit the one pattern (*Cornelius Van Til* , 315). Frame correctly points out that one may need more traditional arguments to make Van Til's overall argument work. "To show that a non-Christian view of motion and rest is unintelligible, we may find it necessary to use a theistic proof from motion like that of Aquinas. We would argue that if motion is to be intelligibly explained, God must exist" (ibid., 318).

Proving Van Til's conclusion, writes Frame, requires a complex argument to show that intelligible communication presupposes biblical theism. "A Van Tillian apologist would have to go into some detail in showing that intelligibility requires an equal ultimacy of one and many, and that such equal ultimacy in turn presupposes the ontological Trinity. . . . I believe that Van Til's conclusion is better described as a *goal* of apologetics. . . . It is unrealistic to expect that all of Christian theism can be established in a single encounter, let alone in a single argument of syllogism" (ibid.).

Van Til wrongly assumes his view is a purely indirect (negative) approach. There is no clear demarcation between indirect and direct arguments. Most arguments can be put in either form. Frame summarizes Van Til's apologetic:

1. If God does not exist, the world is unintelligible.

2. God does not exist.

3. Therefore, the world is unintelligible (ibid., 318).

Since it is agreed that the world is intelligible, then God must exist. However, Frame points out that the same argument can be stated in a positive form:

1. If the world is intelligible, God exists.

2. The world is intelligible.

3. Therefore, God exists (ibid.).

Van Til's protests to the contrary, he cannot avoid giving a positive apologetic argument. This being the case, much of Van Til's steam against classical apologetics evaporates.

Van Til misunderstands the traditional method of apologetics, so wrongly criticizes it for views very similar to his own. Frame says he questions whether transcendental reasoning is so very different from traditional reasoning, especially since traditional arguments may be needed to flesh out this approach (ibid., 45). Frame is insightful in noting that revelational presuppositionalism is strikingly similar to Thomistic approaches. Aquinas would agree with Van Til:

1. that in the realm of being (metaphysics), logic is dependent on God and not God on logic (*Summa Contra Gentiles* , 1.7; 3.47; 1a. 105, 3).

2. that the existence of God is ontologically necessary (ibid., 1a. 2, 3).

3. that without God nothing could be either known or proven true (ibid., 1a. 16, 1–8; 1a2ae. 109, 1).

4. that the basis for Christian truth is neither reason nor experience but the authority of God expressed in Scripture (*On Truth* , 14.8–9; *Summa Contra Gentiles* , 2a2ae. 2, 10; *On the Trinity* , 2.1, ad).

5. that depraved natural humanity willfully represses the revelation of God in Nature (*Summa Contra Gentiles* , 1a2ae. 77, 4: 83, 3; 84, 2; cf. 1a2ae. 109, 1–10).

Van Til complains that traditional apologetic compromises certainty about God. He seeks absolutely certain proof for Christian theism (*In Defense of the Faith* , 103, 104). Yet "Van Til himself admits that our apologetic *argument* may not be adequate to establish that certain conclusion," writes Frame. "If the argument is never stated adequately enough to justify the certainty of its conclusions, then on what basis may the apologists claim certainty for his argument?" (*Cornelius Van Til* , 277). Van Til overstates the case when he ap pears to insist that every argument should be certain (*see* CERTAINTY/CERTITUDE). The evidence is no less cogent in an argument for high probability (ibid., 279).

Van Til was no Thomist in disguise, but he knew less about Aquinas and was far closer to Thomist thought than he realized. The basic difference between Van Til and Aquinas is that, while they both agree *ontologically* that all truth depends on God, Van Til fails to fully appreciate that finite man must ask *epistemologically* how we knows this. In this he confuses the order of *being* and the order of *knowing* .

Either there is a rational basis for knowing or there is not. But one cannot beg the question and merely presuppose the theistic God. Presuppositions cannot be arbitrary. If we argue, as Van Til implied that we should, that Christian theism is a rationally necessary position, it is difficult to see on what rational grounds one could criticize Aquinas for providing rational support for it. How does Van Til know the Christian position is true? If Van Til answered, as he seems to in his writings, "Because it is the only truly rational view," perhaps Aquinas would reply, "That is what I believe. Welcome, dear brother, to the bi-millennial club of rational theists."

Van Til goes further than most Reformed theologians, who themselves take a stronger stance than other Protestant theologies, regarding the noetic effects of radical depravity. Even some of Van Til's strongest defenders admit an overstatement in his formulation. Speaking of Van Til's assertion that "all unbeliever's interpretive activity results in false conclusions," Frame responds that by implication Van Til denies common grace itself (*Cornelius Van Til* , 194). He adds, "the extreme antithetical formulations [of Van Til] are inadequate without considerable qualification." This understanding asserts that the unbeliever literally never makes a correct statement. Even the answer to a mathematical problem is incorrect in that it represents a false view of how the universe works mathematically. Frame finds it simplistic to hold that the noetic effects of sin amount to a propositional falsification of the unbeliever's every utterance (ibid., 211).

Van Til also suggests that human depravity shows itself as much or more in the discrete statements the unbeliever makes, than in life direction. And there is a failure to convey that the unbeliever's very denial of truth in some respects affirms truth (ibid., 207).

Indeed, Van Til himself offers statements inconsistent with his own antithesis between the knowledge of believers and unbelievers. He urges "that we present the message and evidence for the Christian position as clearly as possible, knowing that because man is what the Christian says he is, the non-Christian will be able to understand in an intellectual sense the issues involved" ("My Credo"). Van Til even says of unbelievers: "He has within himself the knowledge of God by virtue of his creation in the image of God." But Van Til hastens to say in the very next sentence: "But this idea of God is suppressed by his false principle, the principle of autonomy" (*In Defense of the Faith* , 170). This principle is the "jaundiced eye" by which all knowing is distorted and false. But how can he understand the issues even in an intellectual sense if there is no common facts, ground, or knowledge of any kind—if he sees all with a jaundiced eye?

Van Til saw this tension in his own view. He speaks of it as a "difficult point." "We cannot give any wholly satisfactory account of the situation as it actually obtains" (*Introduction to Systematic Theology* , 15). If fallen human beings really see everything with a "jaundiced eye," so that they cannot even understand the truth of general revelation or of the gospel, they are not morally accountable. But Scriptures says they are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:19–20 ; 2:12–15). Indeed, Adam and Eve were "dead in trespasses and sin" (cf. Eph. 2:1) the instant they took of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6 ; Rom. 5:12). Yet they heard and understood God when he spoke (Gen. 3:9–19).

A common mistake of Reformed presuppositionalism is to equate the figure of speech *dead* with the concept *annihilated* , a mistake which, fortunately, they do not make when speaking of the "second death" (Rev. 20:14). Death in Scripture is better understood in terms of separation, not annihilation. The prophet said, "your sins have separated you from your God" (Isa. 59:2 KJV). Indeed, "dead" is not the only figure of speech used in the Bible to describe fallen humankind. Sickness, blindness, pollution, and lameness are also used. But none of these imply a person totally unable to understand God's revelation. Many nonpresuppositional Reformed theologians, among whom are Jonathan Edwards , B. B. Warfield , John Gerstner , and R. C. Sproul, believe

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just as firmly in radical depravity without accepting this skewed view of the noetic effects of sin. Depravity can be understood as an inability to initiate or attain salvation without the grace of God.

In this same connection, Reformed presuppositionalists often misinterpret 1 Corinthians 2:14 to mean that unbelievers cannot even understand God's truth before they are regenerated. Besides the obvious difficulty that they would have to be saved before they believe (just the opposite of what the Bible says in such texts as John 3:16 , 36 ; Acts 16:31 , and Rom. 5:1 , this misreads the passage. Nor does it help to set up an order of events in salvation to claim the person being saved is regenerated before being justified, since one is placed in the kingdom of God by regeneration (John 3:3 ; Titus 5:5). The Greek word for "receive" (*dekomai*) means "to welcome." It does not mean they do not understand. They clearly *perceive* them, but do not willingly *receive* (Rom. 1:19–20). As a consequence, they do not know them by experience. A failure to understand these truths leads to a misunderstanding of the effects of sin on the unregenerate mind.

It is supposed by Van Til that a transcendental argument avoids the effects of depravity to which the traditional apologetic arguments are subject. But why should not sin lead the unbeliever to repress the force of a transcendental argument as much as any evidence (*Cornelius Van Til* , 200)? Here the transcendental approach loses a touted advantage over classical apologetics.

This same point applies to Van Til's rejection of a content-filled general revelation , on which traditional theistic arguments are based. It is often alleged that the effects of sin on general revelation make a supernatural revelation necessary. But sin has equally vitiating effects on supernatural revelation as well, as is evidenced by all the Christian denominations, sects, and cults who claim the same supernatural revelation but interpret it in radically different ways. Thus, presupposing a starting point in Holy Scripture does not in itself offer any advantage over beginning in general revelation, as classical apologetics do. The noetic effects of sin do not vanish simply because one turns his head from nature to the Bible.

Van Til's view of the Trinity involved two apparently opposing propositions: God is one person; God is three persons. He never clearly differentiates between the two senses of the term *person* . Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity "begins with an affirmation or the ancient creeds and the Reformed confessions" (*Cornelius Van Til* , 63). However, it goes on to say that "We therefore claim that we have not asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing. Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead is one person" (*Introduction to Systematic Theology* , 229). So, "God is not simply a unity of persons; he is *a* person" (*Cornelius Van Til* , 65).

This is a theological move that no orthodox creed, confession, or major church Father ever took before. Gordon Clark's disciple, John Robbins, went so far as to call it "a radical new heresy" (Robbins, 20). The more common objection, however, is that it violates the law of non-contradiction. Defenders point out that Van Til never calls the doctrine of the Trinity "contradictory," but rather finds it "apparently contradictory" (*Common Grace and the Gospel* , 9). Nor does he deny the traditional view that God is one in essence and three in person; he says

it "is not the whole truth of the matter." He tries to supplement the traditional doctrine, not replace it (*Cornelius Van Til* , 67). It still seems a bit presumptuous to hold that he discovered what nineteen centuries of theologians, creeds and councils had failed to see. The question is not whether Van Til affirms the orthodox formula that God is one is essence and three in persons (with a distinct difference between *person* and *essence*). The controversy is that he also affirms God to be both three persons and yet also only one person (without offering a difference between *person* and *persons*).

His defenders claim that Clark and Robbins do not answer Van Til's argument. "He is one 'being,' not three; the three partake of one 'essence.' Now the question becomes, is this one being personal or impersonal?" Van Til believed the historic formulation made the Father, Son, and Spirit, individuals, but the divine essence, God, could only be regarded as an abstraction. This model could only be inadequate, for God is not an abstraction (ibid., 68).

However, the argument offered is a false dilemma. God is not either personal (in a singular sense) or impersonal. He is tripersonal. Hence, it is not necessary to conclude that the essence of God is impersonal because there are three persons in it. Being tripersonal is being personal. Frame asks the appropriate question: "How, then, do we relate the 'one person' to the 'three persons'? Van Til asserts that 'this is a mystery that is beyond our comprehension.' " Van Til does not say the two assertions are contradictory, but he does not appear to leave any options to contradiction.

The heart of Frame's defense is that something can be both A and not-A if the two A's have different senses. "The traditional language, 'one in essence, three in person' (which, again, Van Til does not reject) brings out more clearly, of course, that the oneness and the threeness are in different respects. But the formulation 'one person and three persons' does not deny that difference of respect" (ibid., 69).

This leads to Frame's last connected point. Obviously, there is a difference between the sense of *person* as applied to the oneness of God and the sense of *persons* as applied to the three members of the Trinity. For one thing, the Father is the begetter, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit is the one who proceeds from both Father and Son. The Godhead as a unity is not any of those three roles.

> Neither Van Til nor I would claim to be able to state, precisely and exhaustively, the differences between God's essence and the individual persons of the Godhead. Doubtless the Clarkite critics of Van Til will find this a damaging admission, for they insist that all theological statements be perfectly precise. Never mind that Scripture itself often fails to be precise about the mysteries of the faith. But the creedal tradition, too, fails to give a "precise" account of the relations between God's "essence" and his "persons." [ibid., 71]

Frame at this point argues, regarding the confessions, which sort out the biblical conception of the Trinity, that " *ousia* and *hypostasis* can be interchangeable. They can mean one substance and three substances."

While Van Til is willing to admit that he cannot really specify any difference in meaning between the two usages of the term "person," yet he criticizes non-Christian views for their contradictions. He says one view "will not lead to greater knowledge, but only to skepticism about the very possibility of truth" (ibid. 77). That very thing could be said of Van Til's view.

Van Til does not overlook the fact that he has not provided a real difference in the definition of the term "person" as used of "one person" and "three persons." He admits that "We may not always be able to show how two concepts can logically coexist" (*Cornelius Van Til* , 71). But unless a difference can be shown, Van Til has not avoided the charge of contradiction. For one cannot have both three and only one of the same subject (person).

Van Til denies "that we can prove to men that we are not asserting anything that they ought to consider irrational, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in persons." But if we cannot do this, what grounds do we have for objecting when unbelievers cannot do the same for their view? Indeed, the whole transcendental method depends on being able to show that the unbeliever's view is reducible to the logically contradictory.

Van Til claims: "I do not maintain that Christians operate according to new laws of thought any more than that they have new eyes or noses" (*In Defense of the Faith* , 296). This claim notwithstanding, Van Til's "laws of thought" are not really the same for believers. There is only a formal identity. There is no real point of contact that is the same for God and humanity. But this leads to skepticism about God, since there is no point of actual identity between our knowledge and his. It is transcendentally necessary to affirm such a content-filled point of identity.
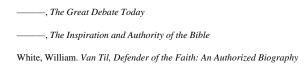
Granting that a transcendental argument is valid, it does not follow that Van Til's form of it is valid. Certainly, as Van Til argues, it is necessary to posit a God to make sense out of the world. However, he has not shown that it is necessary to postulate a triune God. This is true whether or not one accepts his argument that only the Trinity solves the problem of the one and many. Even granting for the sake of argument that there must be more than one person in the Godhead if the world is to make sense, this does not mandate that there are three persons. This they simply believe from Scripture. The same is true of other aspects of Christianity, such as the plan of salvation. Nowhere does Van Til demonstrate this is a transcendentally necessary precondition for making sense out of our world. Thus, there are fideistic elements in Van Til's form of presuppositionalism. It is interesting to note that even Van Til's defenders admit: "I believe that much of Van Til's presuppositionalism should be understood as an appeal to the heart rather than as a straightforward apologetic method" (Frame, *Cornelius Van Til* , 320).

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Verifiability, Principle of. *See* AYER, A. J .

Verification, Kinds of. *Eschatology* (Gk. *eschatos* , "last things") deals with what will happen in the end. *Verification* has to do with how to test the meaning or truth of a claim. Out of the school of logical positivism grew the verification principle. Such proponents as A. J. Ayer , following David Hume , originally claimed that for a statement to be meaningful it had to be either true by definition or else empirically verifiable through one or more of the senses. This proved too narrow, since on this ground the principle of empirical verifiability was not itself empirically verifiable. It too was meaningless.

In the wake of the death of strict verifiability grew a broadening of the principle to include other kinds of verification—experiential, historical, and eschatological. Most philosophers agreed that there had to be specific conditions under which one could know if a statement was meaningful or true. Antony Flew , following John Wisdom's "invisible gardener" parable, argued that, unless there are criteria by which one could know if something is false, one cannot know it is true. Unless one can specify some condition(s) by which a claim could be falsified, there is no way to verify it either. Something has to be able to count against a proposition if evidence is to count for it. This means that, unless a theist can specify conditions under which we could know that God does not exist, there is no ground on which to claim that he does exist.

Types of Verification. Attempts to meet the challenge of verification of a truth claim fall into three categories, past, present, and future. Those that offer criteria for the present can be divided into *theistic proofs* and *experiential tests* .

Historical. Among Christian apologists, John W. Montgomery and Gary Habermas argue that the Christian truth claims can be verified from history by way of the resurrection of Christ (*see* RESURRECTION, EVIDENCE FOR). This view is called historical apologetics or historical verification.

Present Verification. Those who seek some sort of verification in the present fall into the broad categories of rational and experiential. The former offer traditional theistic proofs as verification. Traditional theists note that this is precisely what arguments for and against God's existence do (*see* GOD, EVIDENCE FOR). If one could offer a disproof of God, then they could falsify the claim of theism (*see* GOD, ALLEGED DISPROOFS OF). Likewise, a proof for God can verify his existence. Anything short of a full proof still tends to verify or falsify.

Experiential tests can be special or general. The special ones are often called mystical and deal with unique religious experiences. The latter deal with experiences available to all. Some apologists offer nonmystical experiential tests for the truthfulness of religious statements. Ian Ramsey spoke of the empirical fit of statements that evoke an experience of God (see Ramsey). Friedrich Schleiermacher spoke of a feeling of absolute dependence. Paul Tillich's sense of ultimate commitment fits this category. Some have developed an argument from religious experience as a test for their claims about God. Elton Trueblood is an evangelical who has tried this.

Eschatological Tests. Those coming from the empirical traditions tried other kinds of verification-falsification. John Hick offered the principle of eschatological verification (Hick, 252–74). Claims for immortality can be verified if, for example, we consciously observe our own funerals. We can know God exists after death if we have an experience of transcendent rapture and bliss that brings ultimate fulfillment.

Evaluation. Since other forms of verification are discussed as noted above, eschatological verification will be treated here. On the positive side, future verification does seem to meet the minimal criteria for meaning and truth. It does provide specific conditions under which we could know if certain religious claims are true.

On the other hand, the knowledge will be too late to do anything with it. Atheists (*see* ATHEISM) bank on the nonexistence of God and hell. If the atheist wakes up after death to find that he or she was in error on both counts it will be too late. That was the point of Pascal's Wager (*see* PASCAL, BLAISE). Even for the theist it could be too late. We want to know *now* whether it is worth sacrificing all for God, and which God is the true one. Why suffer for Christ, even to the point of death without evidence that Christianity is true (cf. 2 Cor. 11:22–28 ; 2 Tim. 3:12)? It might be deemed better to avoid all the misery and have a fun-filled life now.

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Vestigial Organs. *See* EVOLUTION, BIOLOGICAL .

Virgin Birth in Isaiah 7:14 . *See* VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST .

Virgin Birth of Christ. The virgin birth of Christ is the perennial target of naturalistic Bible critics, who tend to regard it as the result of pagan influence on Christian writers of the second century. These Christians developed the myth in an emulation of stories from Greek mythology (*see* MIRACLES, MYTH AND ; MYTHOLOGY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT). One reason for the vehemence of these pronouncements is that, if true, the virgin birth establishes beyond question the life of Jesus as a supernatural intervention of God. If antisupernaturalists concede at this point, they have no case left.

Evidence for the Virgin Birth. Credibility of Miracle. At the root of the rejection of the virgin birth of Christ is the rejection of miracles (*see* MIRACLE ; MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST ; MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE). A virgin birth is a miracle. If a theistic God exists, and there is evidence that he does (*see* COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT ; MIRACLES, APOLOGETIC VALUE OF), then miracles are automatically possible. For if there is a God who can act, then there can be acts of God. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that miracles have occurred from the instant of the founding of the universe (*see* BIG BANG ; EVOLUTION, COSMIC). Hence, the record of Jesus' virgin birth cannot be ruled as mythological in advance of looking at the evidence.

Anticipation of the Virgin Birth. Genesis 3:15 . Long before the New Testament recorded the virgin birth, the Old Testament anticipated it. In fact, the earliest messianic prediction in the Bible (*see* PROPHECY, AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE) implies the virgin birth. Speaking to the Tempter (Serpent), "God said 'And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.' " (Gen. 3:15).

That the coming Redeemer was to be the "offspring" or "seed" of the woman is important in a patriarchal culture. Why of a woman? Normally, descendants were traced through their father (cf. Gen. 5 , 11). Even the official genealogy of the Messiah in Matthew 1 is traced through Jesus' legal father Joseph. In the unique term, *seed of the woman* , there is implied that the messiah would come by a woman but not a natural father.

Jeremiah 22 (cf. 2 Samuel 7). Another possible intimation of the virgin birth in the Old Testament is found in the curse placed on Jeconiah which said: "Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule any more in Judah" (Jer. 22:30). The problem with this prediction is that Jesus was the descendant of the throne of David through Jeconiah (cf. Matt. 1:12).

However, since Joseph was only Jesus' *legal* father (by virtue of being engaged to Mary when she became pregnant), Jesus did not inherit the curse on Jeconiah's *actual* descendants. And since Jesus was the actual son of David through Mary according to Luke's matriarchal genealogy (Luke 3), he fulfilled the conditions of coming "from the loins of David" (2 Sam. 7:12–16) without losing legal rights to the throne of David by falling under the curse on Jeconiah. Thus, the virgin birth is implied in the consistent understanding of these Old Testament passages.

Isaiah 7:14 . Both the New Testament (Matt. 1:23) and many Christian apologists use Isaiah 7:14 as a predictive prophecy to prove the Bible (*see* PROPHECY, AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE) makes specific supernatural predictions centuries in advance. However, critics (*see* BIBLE CRITICISM), following the interpretation of many Bible scholars, say verse 16 refers to the birth of Isaiah's own child shortly before the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C . If so, this is not a prophecy about the virgin birth of Jesus and, it has no apologetic value.

Of the three interpretations of Isaiah 7:14 , only one is incompatible with a supernatural predictive understanding in reference to Christ's birth. That is that this prophecy referred only to Isaiah's day and was fulfilled in the natural birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isa. 8:3). Of the other two possibilities, the prophecy could have had a double fulfillment—a preliminary one in Isaiah's child and the final one in Christ's birth. Or this prophecy refers only to the supernatural birth of Christ (Matt. 1:23).

Single Reference to a Natural Birth. Liberal scholars and some conservatives view Isaiah 7:14 as having reference only to the natural conception and birth of the son of the prophetess. They argue that the Hebrew *'almâ* , sometimes translated "virgin" (KJV , ASV , NIV), refers to a young woman, whether married or unmarried, and should be translated "young maiden" (RSV). If the prophet had intended someone who was a virgin, he would have used *bethulah* (cf. Gen. 24:16 ; Levit. 21:3 ; Judg. 21:12). Further, the context reveals that the prophecy had a near-view fulfillment. Verse 16 declares that "before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste" (Isa. 7:16). This was literally fulfilled in the invasion of the Assyrian Tiglath Pileser.

Even in the broader context, only the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz fit the prophecy. Isaiah 8:3 reads: "Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to me, 'Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz' " (Isa. 8:3). The "sign" was promised to Ahaz (7:10) and would have made no sense if its fulfillment was after his time (7:14).

Therefore, the argument concludes that no prediction of Christ's virgin birth should be found here. The use by Matthew was either faulty or purely typological, with no predictive or apologetic value. Matthew uses the phrase "that it might be fulfilled" typologically in other cases (for example, 2:15 , 23). Matthew *applied* to Christ texts that were not messianic in their contexts.

There is a difficulty with the claim that *'almâ* refers to someone who is married. Not once does the Old Testament use *'almâ* to refer to a married person. *Bethulah* , on the other hand, is used for a married women (see Joel 1:8). Among texts using *'almâ* to refer to a virgin are Genesis. 24:43 , Exodus 2:8 , Psalms 68:25 , Proverbs 30:19 , and Song of Solomon 1:3 ; 6:8 .

Some critics use and 1 Chronicles 15:20 and Psalm 46 as examples of *'almâ* (or *alamoth*) referring to a married person. In Psalm 46 it is simply part of the title of the Psalm, "A Song for *Alamoth* ." Nothing in the title or psalm text helps us understand what *Alamoth* means, let alone

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whether it refers to a married person. It may be a musical notation, as one for the young women's choir to sing, or it could refer to some kind of musical accompaniment. The reference in 1 Chronicles 15:20 is similar. Music is being sung "with strings according to *Alamoth* ." Whatever this may mean, it does not prove that *'almâ* means a married woman.

It can be argued that some features of the passage could not possibly refer only to the immediate circumstances: the supernatural nature of the "sign"; reference to the one born as *Immanuel* , "God with us," and the reference to the whole "house of David" (vs. 13). The birth of Maher-Sha lal-Hash-Baz in the next chapter cannot fulfill 7:14 , since the one born was to be named "Immanuel."

While the "sign" was for Ahaz, it also was for the whole "house of David" (vs. 13). A distant sign can be for someone who lives long before the event, provided the benefits of the sign extend to the one for whom it is given. Since the "sign" was the birth of Messiah, the hope of salvation for Ahaz and everyone else, the sign was certainly for him.

But what of 7:16 ? The only meaningful way to understand this verse is that it refers to a child born in Isaiah's day. It should be kept in mind that 7:16 's reference to the Assyrian invasion is itself a supernatural predictive prophecy. The issue is not, then, whether 7:14 is predictive and was fulfilled. The question is whether it was fulfilled in three years or 700. There is a possibility that Isaiah 7:16 can be understood in terms of the virgin-birth-only view. Commentator William Hendriksen suggests this possible interpretation: "Behold, the virgin conceives and gives birth to a son. . . . Before this child, *who before my prophetic eye has already arrived* , shall know to refuse the evil and chose the good—i.e., *within a very short time* —the land whose two kings you abhor shall be deserted" (Hendriksen, 139). Or, if one wants to be more literal, the Assyrians did invade *before* the child Jesus grew up—long before.

It is generally acknowledged that not all usages of the phrase "that it might be fulfilled" entail a truly predictive prophecy, Isaiah 7:14 need not be one of them. Matthew cites Micah 5:2 , a clear prediction that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:5 ; see also Matt 3:3 ; 21:5 ; 22:43).

Double Reference. Even if the immediate context reveals that the prophecy had a near-view fulfillment in mind, this does not mean that there is not also a fuller fulfillment in a far-view reference to Christ. According to this view, many Old Testament prophecies have both a partial fulfillment in their day and a complete fulfillment in the distant future. Because of their desperate situation, God promised to give to Ahaz a sign that would assure the people that God would ultimately deliver them from bondage. This was a sign of the physical deliverance of Israel from the bondage of their enemies. It ultimately was a sign of the spiritual deliverance of spiritual Israel from bondage to Satan. The first aspect of the sign was fulfilled in the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, the second aspect in the birth of Jesus to the true virgin, Mary. Such double fulfillments are clear in other prophecies. Zechariah 12:10 can be applied both to Christ's first (John 19:37) and second comings (Rev. 1:7). Part of Isaiah 61 was fulfilled in Jesus (Isa. 61:1–2a ; cf. Luke 4:18–19). Part remains for the second coming (Isa. 61:2b–11).

According to the double-reference view, *'almâ* refers to a young maiden who has never had sexual intercourse. The wife of Isaiah who bore the son in fulfillment of the first aspect of the prophecy was a virgin until she conceived by Isaiah. However, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a complete fulfillment—a virgin when she conceived Jesus (Matthew 1:24–25).

Other arguments for this position also fit the supernatural birth-only view. Both of these views reject the idea that the significance of Isaiah 7:14 is exhausted in the natural birth of the prophetess's son.

Single Reference to a Supernatural Birth. Some scholars defend the position that Isa. 7:14 refers only to the supernatural virgin birth of Christ. Contrary to the first option, *'almâ* is only translated "virgin" in the Old Testament and has no other options. The prophetess, therefore, does not qualify. The Greek Old Testament (*Septuagint*) translated *'almâ* by the unambiguous word *parthenos* which can only mean "virgin." These translators, working before the advent, evidently believed that this was a prediction of the virgin birth of the Messiah. The inspired New Testament sanctioned this work by quoting from the *Septuagint* in Matt. 1:23 . Further, to translate *'almâ* as a young girl who is not yet married, but would soon marry Isaiah means that it would be no longer a *virgin* who is conceiving, but a married woman. Isaiah 7:14 regards both the conception and birth as by a virgin.

Proponents of the supernatural-birth-only view point out that the prediction obviously goes beyond Ahaz to the whole "house of David" (Isa. 7:13). That hardly would apply to a natural birth by the prophetess in Isaiah's day. Also, the emphasis is on some wonderful, unheard of "sign" (Isa. 7:11–14). Why should an ordinary birth be understood as an extraordinary sign?

The whole context of Isaiah 7–11 (cf. Micah 5:2f .) forms an unbreakable chain of messianic prophecy:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." [7:14]

"Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel!" [8:8b]

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. [9:6]

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD —and he will delight in the fear of the LORD . He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist. [11:1–5]

Matthew 1:22 both interprets Isaiah 7:14 as prophetic with the phrase "that it might be fulfilled" and adds an intensifying phrase, " *now all this was done* that it might be fulfilled . . ." (emphasis added). The manner of the quotation emphasizes the supernatural quality of the birth and the deity of Christ. Most scholars on both sides of the issue acknowledge that the phrase "that it might be fulfilled" does not necessarily refer to a predicative prophecy. However, indications are that Matthew 1:23 is an example of one that is predictive.

Finally, the same verse cannot refer to the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, for the same verse cannot mean two different (opposing things). If both the *Septuagint* and the inspired New Testament affirm that this refers to an actual virgin, it must refer to Christ alone.

Translating the Name Immanuel. A final issue that arises in this debate regards whether the name *Immanuel* mandates that Isaiah was referring to God incarnate. It does not. *Immanuel* can mean "God *is* with us." While the translation "God with us" seems to mean the name-bearer has deity, it is linguistically possible to translate "Immanuel" as "God is with us," which does not denote deity for the name-bearer. The name of a child can refer to a situation meaningful to the giver of the name. Thus Sarah named her son *Isaac* , meaning "laughter."

However, overall evidence indicates that the traditional translation is correct. When a point is made of a biblical name, it most often refers to the one who bears it: *Eve* , mother of the "living" (Gen. 3:20); *Noah* , related to the Hebrew for "comfort" (Gen. 5:29); *Abram* , "father" and *Abraham* , "father of many" (Gen. 17:5); *Sarai* , "princess," and *Sarah* , "princess of God" (Gen. 17:15); *Esau* , "hairy" (Gen. 25:25); *Jacob* , "He grasps the heel" or "deceiver," and *Israel* , "He struggles with God" (Gen. 27:36 ; 32:28); *Naomi* , "pleasant," and *Mara* , "bitter" (Ruth 1:20); *Nabal* , "fool" (1 Sam. 25:3 , 25); *Jesus* , " *Yahweh* saves" (Matt. 1:21); Peter, "rock" (Matt. 16:18); and Barnabas, "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

Both the immediate and broad contexts show that *Immanuel* refers to the character of the one bearing the name. The event is a supernatural sign. The whole "house of David," is in view, especially within the "messianic chain" of Isaiah 7–11 . The New Testament interprets it as referring to Christ. All these factors support the view that it is a reference to Christ.

The Reliability of the New Testament Record. The evidence that Jesus was conceived of a virgin is based in the reliability of the New Testament documents and the New Testament witnesses. Both of these have been established with strong evidence. In fact, as is shown elsewhere, the evidence for the authenticity of the New Testament is greater than for that of any book from the ancient world (*see* ACTS, HISTORICITY OF ; NEW TESTAMENT, DATING OF ; NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS ; NEW TESTAMENT, HISTORICITY OF ; NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS ; NEW TESTAMENT, NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES). It remains only to show that these records do testify to the virgin birth of Christ.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament clearly affirms that Christ was born of a virgin.

Matthew 1:18–23 . Matthew wrote:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but *before they came together* , she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, *he had in mind to divorce her quietly* . But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because *what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit* . She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"* —which means, "God with us." [1:18–23]

The emphasized sections point to four factors which demonstrate that Christ was virgin born: First, Mary conceived *"before they came together* , *"* thus revealing that it was not a natural conception. Second, Joseph's initial reaction reveals that he had not had sexual intercourse with Mary, since when he found that she was pregnant *"he had in mind to divorce her quietly* . *"* Third, the phrase *"what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit"* reveals the supernatural nature of the event. Finally, the citation from the *Septuagint* translation of Isaiah 7:14 about a *parthenos* , "virgin," giving "birth" to a child indicates that Mary had not had sexual relations with anyone. She was not simply a virgin before the baby was conceived, but after it was conceived and even when it was born.

Luke 1:26–35 . Mark begins immediately with Jesus' ministry, in accord with his stress on Christ as "Servant" (cf. 10:45). But we would expect a physician, Dr. Luke, to give attention to the circumstances of the birth. He begins with the announcement of Christ birth of a virgin:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a *virgin pledged to be married* to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The *virgin's* name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are *highly favored!* The Lord is with you." Mary was *greatly troubled* at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." . . . "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, " *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.* So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." [1:26–35]

The emphasized text again demonstrates that the conception of Christ was supernatural: Mary was a "virgin" (*parthenos*), "pledged to be married." Mary's reaction of being "greatly troubled" and being "afraid," as well as her astonished question, "How will this be?" reveals that she was a virgin. The angel gave some description of how the conception would happen through the Holy Spirit and "the power of the Most High."

Luke 2:1–19 . When Luke records the birth he again stresses that Mary was only "pledged to be married," which in that culture meant she had not yet had sexual intercourse with Joseph. The supernatural appearance of the angel and the heavenly choir demonstrate that something

extraordinary had happened. Mary's reaction was to contemplate in awe the mystery of it all. Obviously she knew something supernatural and holy had occurred (vs. 19).

John 2:2–11 . John stresses the overall divinity of Christ (*see* CHRIST, DEITY OF), and doesn't dwell on particulars. Nevertheless, there are a couple of strong intimations in John's Gospel that Jesus was virgin born. When Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana of Galilee his mother was obviously aware of his supernatural origin and confident that he could do the supernatural. John wrote: "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, *'They have no more wine . '* 'Dear woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. *'My time has not yet come . '* His mother said to the servants, *'Do whatever he tells you . ' "* Indeed, the emphasized text reveals that Mary seems not only to believe that Jesus could do a miracle but to be requesting one, even though she had never seen him do one since this was Jesus' "first miracle" (vs. 11). Her understanding of his supernatural ability came from her past relationship with Jesus, including his birth.

John 8:41 . Even the insult of Jesus' enemies shows that the circumstances of his birth had stirred general gossip, as might be expected if the story spread. Jesus said to them, " 'You are doing the things your own father [Satan] does.' 'We are not illegitimate children,' they protested. 'The only Father we have is God himself." The Jews may have simply been responding defensively to Jesus' attack on their misplaced confidence in the fatherhood of Abraham. If so, it is an odd rejoinder. But it makes perfect sense if they were turning the argument back on Jesus' own legitimacy. Even Joseph had needed an angelic visitation to be convinced Mary's purity (Matt. 1:20). He and Mary likely faced a continuing shadow on their reputations. But Jesus faced the matter boldly in responding to his sniggering accusers, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46).

Galatians 4:4 . The Epistles are filled with references to Jesus' sinlessness. In the context of teaching about the innate sinfulness that adheres to each descendant of Adam (for example, Romans 5), these teachings themselves indicate that God had done something different in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21 ; Heb. 4:15 ; 1 John 3:3). Paul's reference to Jesus as "born of a woman" is relatively explicit. He wrote, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Gal. 4:4). This refers to Genesis 3:15 . In a Jewish patriarchal culture one is begotten of a male (the father). To bring attention to being "born of a woman" is to show that something unusual is occurring—in Jesus' case a virgin birth.

The Charge of Mythology. It is difficult to deny that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ. The easier attack is to say that it is a myth patterned after Greek and Roman gods and was not really a historical event. For a full refutation of the charge that the Gospels evolved over a few generations into a myth-filled legend of Jesus' life, see in particular articles on the New Testament, plus see MITHRAISM , DIVINE BIRTH STORIES , BIBLE CRITICISM , JESUS SEMINAR , and Q DOCUMENT . In brief:

- Evidence is unassailable that the New Testament was written by contemporaries and eyewitnesses (cf. Luke 1:1–4). Second-century dating theories have now been thoroughly discredited by archaeological and manuscript evidence, allowing no time for

legend development (*see* NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS ; NEW TESTAMENT WITNESSES, RELIABILITY OF , and NEW TESTAMENT, HISTORICITY OF).

- Virgin birth records do not show any of the standard literary marks of the myth genre (*see* MITHRAISM ; DIVINE BIRTH STORIES ; MYTHOLOGY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT).

- Persons, places, and events of Christ's birth precise and historically substantiated. Luke in particular goes to great pains to note his torical detail (Luke 3:1–2 ; for Luke's credentials as historian see ACTS, HISTORICITY OF).

- No Greek myth even remotely corresponds to the literal incarnation of a monotheistic God in human form (cf. John 1:1–3 , 14) by way of a literal virgin birth (Matt. 1:18–25). The Greeks were polytheists, not monotheists.

- Stories of Greek gods become human via miraculous events like a virgin birth postdated the time of Christ. Hence, if there is any influence it is from Christianity on mythology, not the reverse.

Conclusion. Historical evidence that Jesus was supernaturally conceived of a virgin is more than substantial. Indeed, there are more eyewitness contemporary records of the virgin birth than for most events from the ancient world. The records show no signs of myth development. Indeed, they are surrounded by historical references to real people, places, and times. Thus, there is no reason to believe Jesus was not literally, biologically born of a virgin just as the Bible claims he was. Only an unjustified antisupernatural bias is ground for any conclusion to the contrary.

A particular battleground text is Isaiah 7:14 , which is cited by Matthew. Critics argue that it has no predictive value. At worst the text refers to events in Isaiah's time only, which were applied typologically to Christ but have no predictive value. There is reason to believe the text refers, in part or whole, to a prediction of the virgin birth. In any case, there are other clear predictive texts in the Old Testament (*see* PROPHECY, AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE).

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Voltaire, François-Marie. François-Marie Voltaire (1694–1778) was born in Paris to a well-to-do French family. He received a classical education under the Jesuits at Louis-le-Grand. He abandoned the study of law for literary pursuits. His strongly satirical penchant resulted in banishment to Holland in 1713 and imprisonment in the Bastille (1717–1718). Beginning with his epic poem, *La Henriade* (1723) on Henry IV (1366–1413), the last tolerant English king, Voltaire dominated the French stage for a half century.

Voltaire wrote *Letters Concerning the English Nation* , where there was more religious toleration at the time than in France. In the French edition, he included a critique of Blaise Pascal's (1623–1662) *Pensees* . *Lettres philosphiques* (1734) was an inspiration for liberal thinkers in the eighteenth century. *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756) was published while he lived in Geneva, and *Candide* , a satire on Gottfried Leibniz 's "best of all possible worlds" theodicy, was published in 1756. The themes of his earlier *Lettres* were developed more fully later in *Dictionare philosophique* (1764).

Voltaire's Deistic God. Although he used the term "theist" (*see* THEISM) to describe his philosophy, Voltaire was a deist (*see* DEISM). He believed in a Creator who did not supernaturally intervene in the world. His strong belief in the design of nature kept Voltaire from atheism , a view that was later attacked by Charles Darwin (1809–1882).

Voltaire did not believe that the existence of God is inborn. He observed that some nations have no knowledge of a creating Deity. "Every man comes into the world with a nose and five fingers, but not one possesses at birth any knowledge of God" (*Philosophical Letters* , 39–40). Like consciousness of a moral law, the sense of deity develops gradually, though inevitably as one contemplates the evidence God placed in the natural world.

Evidence for the Existence of God. He accepted many of Thomas Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God. His cosmological argument is tight and persuasive:

1.   I exist; so something exists.

2.   If something exists, something has existed from all eternity; for what exists either is self-existent or has had its existence communicated to it by another being.

3.   If what exists is self-existent, it exists *necessarily* ; it always has existed necessarily: and it is God.

4.   If what exists has had existence communicated to it from another being, and that other being has derived *its* existence from a third, who must necessarily be God (*Voltaire and Rousseau against the Atheists* , 42–43).

His teleological argument followed the form of William Paley 's (1743–1805): "I shall always be of the opinion that a clock proves a clock-maker, and that the universe proves a God." He adds, "For my part, in nature as an art, I see nothing but final causes; and I as much believe that apple-trees were made for the purpose of bearing apples, as the watches are made for the purpose of showing the time of day" (ibid., 35). "Can it be that these *copies* imply an intelligent maker, and the *originals* do nothing of the kind? . . . "This of itself appears to me the most convincing demonstration of the existence of a God, and I cannot conceive in what way it can be answered" (ibid., 9).

The Attributes of God. Voltaire believed, with Aquinas, that the essential attributes of God, the First Mover, could be inferred from nature. "This one mover is very *powerful* , otherwise he could not regulate so vast and complicated a machine [as the universe]." Likewise, "He is very *intelligent* , since we, who are intelligent, can produce nothing equal to the least of the springs of this machine." Further, "He is a *necessary* being, inasmuch as the machine could not exist, but for him. . . . He is *eternal* , for he cannot have sprung from nonentity, which being nothing can produce nothing" (ibid., 9–10). Voltaire seemed to accept God's *simplicity* or indivisibility. For he speaks of the "feat to convey a false idea of God, by appearing to consider him as composed of parts—and those, too, unconnected parts—parts hostile to each other" (ibid., 24).

However, Voltaire equivocates on God's *infinity* . He said, "I am forced to admit eternity, but I am not forced to admit that there is any such thing as infinity" (ibid., 12). "I perceive only that there is something which is more powerful than myself, but nothing further" (ibid., 42). "I know no reason why God should be infinite" (ibid., 11). However, while God is not infinite in his being, Voltaire seems to acknowledge God's infinite in duration (eternity) power (omnipotent), "for what restraint is there upon him?" (ibid., 44). Voltaire appears to foreshadow the later finite God views of John Stuart Mill .

What God wills, he wills with necessity. For he is a Necessary Being. This necessity does not nullify free will. "I necessarily will that I may be happy. I do not will this the less because I *necessarily* will it; on the contrary, I will it only the more forcibly from the fact that my will is invincible" (ibid., 16).

God expects his creatures to live by the natural moral law. In a very frank passage, he wrote: "What other restraint could be laid on cupidity and on secret and unpunished transgressions than the idea of an eternal master who sees us, and will judge even our most hidden thoughts?" (ibid., 35). It is not clear how Voltaire reconciled this with his doubts about immortality, unless all the judgment was to come in this life, something not apparent to most people.

Other Beliefs of Voltaire. *Ethics.* Ethics was Voltaire's chief concern. Dogmas divide, but ethics unite. All civil law should be based on the moral law common to all men rooted in a common human nature. Justice was the underlying principle. He hated injustice, cruelty, and oppression. Happiness of the individual and society were the chief goal of ethical behavior.

Voltaire had a naturalistic view of both religion and ethics. People are born with a moral capacity, if not with moral instincts. However derived, they are the foundation of society. Without them, there is no possibility to operate a humane world.

Special Providence and Miracles . God was necessary to get the world going, but he has not manifested any special providential care toward it since then. Indeed, the general theme of Voltaire's *Zadig* seem to have been to question God's justice. Voltaire distinguished between God's general and special providence. He allowed for the former in the deistic sense that God endowed human beings with reason and feelings of benevolence, but he denies the latter. The evil in the world stood between him and an omnibenevolent God (*see* EVIL, PROBLEM OF).

As for miracles, "not a single one of the prophecies that Pascal referred to can be honestly applied to Christ; . . . his discussion of miracles was pure nonsense" (Torrey, *Voltaire and the English Deists* , 264).

Immortality of the Soul. Voltaire's view on the existence of mind and soul gave rise to later materialism, though he remained skeptical. Rooted in English empiricism, Voltaire eventually concluded: "I cannot doubt that God has not granted sensations, memory, and consequently ideas, to organized matter" (ibid., 264). Throughout his life he maintained a skeptical view of the soul, his expression in the last chapter of *Micromegas* (1752) humorously sums up his view: "May God, if there is one, save my soul, if I have one." Others developed Voltaire's skepticism about the soul into a complete atheistic materialism .

Inhumane Christianity. His anonymous poem *Epitre a Uranie* (1722) was a diatribe against Christian belief in a jealous, tyrannical deity of the Old Testament and the inhumane condemnation of all pagans to eternal punishment. Addressing the benevolent, merciful deity he adored, Voltaire prayed: "I am not a Christian that I may love thee more" (ibid., 266). Voltaire denounced all revealed religions (*see* REVELATION, SPECIAL).

Voltaire's attack on Christianity fired on one of its most noted defenders of his time, Pascal . In Voltaire's twenty-fifth philosophical letter, he focused on Pascal's Christian view of the Fall, redemption, divine providence, predestination, and grace. He believed Pascal was neither enlightened nor humanitarian and that he encouraged fanaticism. As for Pascal's "wager," Voltaire was shocked that he would resort to such a means to prove God. Voltaire replied "the heavens declare the glory of God."

Other than this anonymous work, Voltaire reserved his strongest criticism of Christianity until after his retirement in the early 1760s. In his account of the renegade priest, Jean Meslier (1762), he wrote:

What then are the vain resources of Christians? Their moral principles? These are basi cally the same in all religions. Their distinctives are in cruel dogmas [that] have arisen from them and have preached persecution and dissension. Should we believe their miracles? But what people have not theirs and what philosophic minds do not despise these fables? . . . Their prophecies? Has not their falsity been demonstrated? . . . Their morals? Are they not often infamous? The establishment of their religion? But did it not

begin with fanaticism, was it not fostered by intrigue, and the edifice visibly maintained by force? Its doctrine? But is not that the height of absurdity? [ibid., 266]

For Voltaire "the establishment of Christianity [was] a grievous aberration of the human mind, a halt in the progress of humanity" (ibid., 267).

Voltaire found arguments against miracles (*see* MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST) from David Hume and English deists. In Anthony Collins he discovered arguments against predictive prophecy. And from French rationalists he was convinced of countless contradictions and inconsistencies in the Bible.

As for Christ, he was accepted as his master over other religious leaders, such as Confucius (551–479 B.C .), whom he admired. However, he depicted Christ as a deist or humanist. Voltaire rejected the Christ of the Gospels, though, as Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), he accepted Christ's essential moral teachings as reported there. The only sense in which Voltaire's views can be called Christian is in the deistic sense. The core Christian theistic and moral teachings of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humankind are common to all religions as revealed in nature (see his *Traite sur la tolerance* [1763]).

Evil. Citing Epicurus (341–270 B.C .), Voltaire agreed that: "Either God can remove evil from the world and will not; or being willing to do so, cannot; or he neither can or will; or he is both able and willing." But "if he is willing and cannot, he is not omnipotent. If he can but will not, he is not benevolent. If he is neither willing nor able, he is neither omnipotent nor benevolent. . . . if he both wants to and can, whence comes evil over the face of the earth?" (cited in *Voltaire and the English Deists* , 265).

Voltaire's writings on evil were directed against the optimism of Leibniz and Alexander Pope (1688–1744). His classic satire *Candide* was directed against this "best of all possible worlds" in the most cutting way. He rejected the optimistic "whatever is, is good" or "partial ill is universal good" for a stoic acceptance of fate and a desire to make life endurable in spite of it (*see* EVIL, PROBLEMS OF).

Religious Attitude. Despite his antipathy to Christianity and supernatural religion, Voltaire had a deep religious experience of his own and strongly defended natural religion. As Norman Torrey put it, "he felt a genuine sense of awe and veneration, expressed far too often to be ignored, that could have come only from the personal mystical experience of cosmic grandeur" (*Voltaire and the English Deists* , 265).

Evaluation. Positive Aspects. Voltaire ardently defended many of the same things that theists, moralists, and freedom lovers have cherished. He defended God's existence, exposed superstition, maintained a deeply religious attitude, valued human reason in the pursuit of truth, and had a high sense of morality and justice.

With theists Voltaire spoke against atheism. He wrote: "I have always been convinced that atheism cannot do any good, and may do very great harm. I have pointed to the infinite difference between the sages who have written against superstition and the madmen who have

written against God. There is neither philosophy nor morality in any system of atheism" (*Philosophical Letters* , 33). He adds, "it would not be difficult to prove from history that atheism may sometimes produce as much evil as the most barbarous superstitions" (ibid., 29). Indeed, "it is altogether probable that all the powerful men who have passed their lives in that round of crimes which fools denominate *strokes of policy, revolutionary remedies, art of governing, & c .*, have been atheists" (ibid., 33).

Having long admired the English, Voltaire was influenced by John Locke (1632–1704) and Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Newton's law of gravitation inspired in Voltaire a deep sense of awe for nature and its supremely intelligent Cause. He wrote: "The same gravitation penetrates into all the heavenly bodies, and impels them toward each other . . . and this let me remark in passing, establishes what Plato had divined (I know not how), that the world is the work of the *Everlasting Geometer* " (ibid., 7).

Voltaire correctly perceived that evil is one of the great problems for a theist. He also saw clearly the form of the objection, namely, the seeming impossibility of God being both all-good and all-powerful without defeating evil. What he did not see was that there is a way between the horns of the dilemma (*see* EVIL, PROBLEM OF).

Those who believe in rational religion can be grateful for Voltaire's exposure of superstition and ignorance in religion. This emphasis aids greatly the pursuit of the truth. It is an objective check on what would otherwise be unbridled passion and irrationality.

Voltaire learned well from Locke and English deists the need for religious freedom and tolerance. Locke's influence on Jefferson was a significant influence on the American Revolution. Forced religion, involving as it does a free expression of the soul, is a contradiction in terms. It is the obligation of government to protect freedom of religion, not to enforce a State religion.

Negative Critiques. As a form of deism , Voltaire's theology is vulnerable to the inconsistency inherent in deism. As noted in the article DEISM , it admits the big miracle (creation of the universe) but denies smaller ones. It was common for desists to follow the arguments against miracles laid down by Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677) and Hume . These arguments have been shown to be without foundation, begging the question, and designed to favor naturalism (*see* MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST).

From a purely natural point of view, one might sympathize with Voltaire's doubts about immortality. However, in view of the overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of Christ (*see* RESURRECTION, EVIDENCE FOR), there is every reason to believe in life after death. Indeed, Voltaire does not appear to be consistent with his own belief in a God who judges all men, for he knows that not all evils are justly punished in this life. As many other deists, skeptics, and atheists, Voltaire presses the dilemma of evil. But in so doing he undermines his own view. For how can we know there are ultimate injustices unless we posit an ultimate standard of justice? But if God is ultimately just, then the problem of evil is resolved. For the unpunished evils we see are only immediately unjust. If God is perfectly just, he will take care of them at the time he decides (*see* EVIL, PROBLEM OF).

Voltaire's dilemma is a false one. For the fact that evil is *not yet* defeated does not mean it will not be. If God is all-good, he wants to defeat it. If he is all-powerful, he can defeat it. And if he is both of those things and evil is *not yet* defeated, it *will be* .

It was common for "enlightenment" thinkers to take pot-shots at the injustice of hell. But their presupposed standard of ultimate justice demands it. Otherwise, there is no ultimate justice and God is not ultimately just, which he must be since the very concept of an ultimate injustice implies an ultimate Justice.

Also typical of this period was negative Bible criticism. But these criticisms were built on an unjustified antisupernaturalism and they were pre-archaeological. The biblical texts have since been overwhelmingly substantiated (*see* ACTS, HISTORICITY OF ; ARCHAEOLOGY, OLD TESTAMENT ; ARCHAEOLOGY, NEW TESTAMENT ; NEW TESTAMENT, HISTORICITY OF).

Like others who adopted the history-of-religion theory's unjustified evolutionary hypothesis of animism to henotheism to polytheism to monotheism, Voltaire bought into the notion that the Old Testament God was a vengeful tribal deity in contrast to the New Testament's God of love. As a matter of fact, God is described as loving and merciful much more in the Old Testament (see, for example, Gen. 43:14 ; Exod. 20:6 ; Num. 14:19 ; Deut. 7:9 ; Psalm 136 ; Jonah 4:2). The most severe passages on eternal judgment are found in the New Testament (for example, Matt. 25:41 ; Luke 16:19–31 ; Rev. 20:11–15).

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Voluntarism. *See* ESSENTIALISM, DIVINE .