

ARISE & BUILD

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ALL OR NOTHING

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



Waging a war on only a small fraction of the battlefield, leaving the rest of the enemy-held territory and arsenals unchallenged, is one quick way to lose millions of acres while gaining a few square feet. But this is how Christians have fought their battles for far too long. We've managed to *ghettoize* the battlefield: the enemy funnels us into a straitened canyon to wage war, keeping all the choice land for himself. Whatever happens in the canyon has little impact on the rest of the world, although Christians send "dispatches from the front" – the narrow canyon – and publish books about their so-called victories to incentivize more donations.

But these are pyrrhic victories. They are defeats with the face of victory plastered over them. And these false victories are heralded as rendering unto God the things that are God's, without appreciating what the "things of God" fully embraces.

We'll step back into Dr. Rushdoony's discussion of Cornelius Van Til's work on this matter. This may appear to be couched in the language of apologetics or philosophy, but you must look deeper into the matter. These two men pack a ton of power into short sentences that are too easily glossed over, and we risk burnout in the tiny canyon humanists would want to keep us fighting in while they claim all the rest of the world as their own. And the proof the humanists use for that claim is that the Christians are only fighting for what's in the canyon, which means the rest of creation is precisely what humanists say it is: *theirs*.

And this cannot be allowed to stand.

VAN TIL AND THE DOCTRINE OF FACT

We start in the middle of the argument as presented by Rushdoony in order to appreciate the implications of a suicidal plan for spiritual battle. Here he cites a key part of the argument as put forward by Van Til: "What our opponents mean by the existence of any 'fact' is existence *apart from God*."¹

Now, Van Til is notorious for his dense writing style, but Rushdoony provides a visual example that we would do well to focus on, to better prepare us to understand how important this point actually is. He uses the example of a diving board. The diver (representing man looking at reality) stands on the tip of the diving board, and beneath him is the water. So far, so good: the man can observe the pool fairly well from the tip of the diving board, where his feet are placed. And modern man sees himself like this diver does: on the tip of the board, assessing reality from his vantage point.

What the diver omits from consideration is that *the diving board is attached to the ground*. He only cares about standing on the tip of the board, but the tip of the board wouldn't hover over the water unless the diving board were anchored to the ground at its foundation. The diver only looks forward, never backward to the rest of the diving board which makes his position over the water possible. *He asserts that the tip of the board is his starting point*. But it isn't his ultimate starting point: he has deliberately omitted the rest of the diving board and how it is affixed to the ground. *Man blinds himself to the diving board he stands on*.

And because man starts his reasoning process from the tip of the board, he draws

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some very dangerous conclusions that he passes on to his Christian neighbors, who also adopt those conclusions as common coin – really, common ground – between regenerate and unregenerate men. Except the Christian is under obligation to magnify the entire diving board and its anchor points, and his forgetfulness here in following a multitude to think humanistically is the trigger point for the collapse of his worldview and his Christian convictions.

Rushdoony puts it this way:

The difference between Christian theism and anti-theism is not confined to the existence of God but to the whole field of knowledge. Instead of both sharing a common knowledge of the world and being in disagreement as to whether God exists, or can and need be known, we have instead a radical disagreement as to the nature of knowledge. It is this insistence that constitutes the originality of Van Til's insight as well as the offense of his position.²

The offense of Van Til's position is that he widens the war from a dispute over one point (does God exist or doesn't He) to *every point*: he declares total war on humanist conceptions of all knowledge and reality, upon every so-called "fact." And this total war calls into question everything the humanists think, plans, and does. The humanist does not get away with assuming that Christians will only fight the one battle, over God's existence, while everything else is safely in humanist hands as agreed on for far too long by both sides. All of reality is to be fought over. The humanists hate

this, and many Christians, being slothful and compromised, hate it too. "Van Til complicates everything!" they wail. But the reality is that *sin has complicated everything*, while Van Til and Rushdoony are putting everything back in proper perspective.

There is a reason, then, that Van Til doesn't go toe-to-toe with the enemy over a given fact without first confronting the enemy's "philosophy of fact." Which is to say, Van Til wants to know how they manage to stand over the pool water, toes curled on the tip of the board, without uttering a peep about the rest of the diving board and how it is anchored to the ground to permit the diving board to stretch over the pool. It is the Christian position that accounts for all these elements, while the humanists wear blinders and demand all men everywhere do the same.

It is significant that these citations from Rushdoony's book on Van Til appear in a chapter entitled "The Emperor Has No Clothes." And as Rushdoony pointed out, everybody hated the young child who dared to tell the truth about the naked emperor parading down the street. But today's Christian is called to be as bold as that child in calling out the delusions of humanism. *Bold before men, humble before God.*

But this appears to be a tall order, judging from the wimpy silence of most Christians. Small wonder, then, that the battle continues to be waged in the narrow canyon, over the one point of God's existence, with the rest of existence being given as a gift to the unregenerate without any Christians willing to assert the crown rights of Christ over His creation.

EXISTENCE ITSELF IS AT STAKE

What becomes evident in Van Til's analysis is that in the humanist's chain of reasoning, we end up with a *doctrine of existence*. This seems abstract at first glance, so it is helpful to look at the chain as expressed by Van Til (I will amend slightly for clarity's sake).

For anyone to call the existence of God into question, that skeptic must (1) himself exist and (2) he must possibly exist apart from God. It appears then that the very connotation of the term *existence* is in question.

Humanists might allow all sorts of little ghettos and corners for the God of the Bible to have for Himself: the space between one's ears, within the walls of the church, etc. Humanists allow this just so long as the rest of the public space is anti-theistic.

Remember our earlier citation from Van Til that humanists mean “existence *apart from God*” for every fact? But how do you apply “existence *apart from God*” to God’s existence? God is locked out of His universe at the very start of the humanist’s reasoning process.

Van Til sees four possibilities, only one of which is a consistently Christian option, which I will present in Rushdoony’s wording for simplicity’s sake:

1. It’s reasonable to doubt the existence of God but not intelligible to doubt the existence of the universe.
2. We can doubt the existence of both God and the universe as the only intelligible step.
3. It is not intelligible to doubt the existence of either God or the universe.
4. It is possible to think intelligibly of the non-existence of the universe but impossible to doubt the existence of God.³

Which of these four is the consistent Christian position? Here is where the shock factor comes in, which is symptomatic of how marinated Christians are in humanistic philosophical assumptions. And it is these shared assumptions that sap the strength of Christian resolve, whereby we cede far too much of the world to the devil. We know humanists gravitate to Option 1, and we assume that solipsism is the only philosophy available to those who hold to Option 2, leaving Option 3 to the Christian. But Option 3 is not the Christian position – Option 4 is!

How can this be? Rushdoony explains it very well for us, putting our feet back in the proper boots to march to war with:

Of these four positions, only the last is consistent with theism, not because Christianity denies the existence of the universe, but because it cannot consider the universe as the ultimate reality and therefore the ground of all thought. Without God, nothing can exist, and therefore God alone is the starting point of all intelligible thinking.⁴

Here is the problem in a nutshell: humanists – and far too many Christians – functionally regard the universe as the ultimate starting point for all intents and purposes. And this amounts to an insidious form of Baal worship, for one’s ultimate starting point becomes the god of the system. Again, there is a reason that the subtitle to Rushdoony’s book *The One and the Many* speaks to *Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy*. Man has an over-riding interest in ultimates – and is especially receptive to hearing that he himself is ultimate in some way. But he is content if the impersonal universe is his ultimate point of reference, since that position hides from view the fact that we actually live in terms of *cosmic personal determinism*—under the government of God.

The foregoing impasse pours fuel on the fire of the concept of common ground. The search for common ground is a humanistic search: there is not a drop of evangelistic content in it, nor can it energize the ministry of reconciliation⁵ that has been committed to His people. The appeal to *common ground* requires that we lay aside the spiritual weapons appointed for the purpose of bringing every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5). The fact of the matter, as exposed by Van Til and Rushdoony above, is that *common ground is hostile ground*. It is where Christ is ignored, neglected, omitted, considered superfluous, and/or muzzled. Then, and only then, do we get common ground: by making something other than God ultimate over reality. That we’re willing to buy a false peace this way is an atrocity.

IS GOD THE GOD OF THE HILLS?

Of course, there are halfway measures that achieve the same result in derailing Christian resolve. Humanists might allow all sorts of little ghettos and corners for the

God of the Bible to have for Himself: the space between one's ears, within the walls of the church, etc. Humanists allow this just so long as the rest of the public space is anti-theistic. We use the word anti-theistic instead of nontheistic because the humanist doctrine of knowledge, to put man in the driver's seat, must demote and dethrone God. Anti-theistic is the proper word, martial connotations notwithstanding. We do not use weapons of the flesh, we use spiritual weapons,⁶ and we rely on regeneration, not revolution.⁷ The kingdom of God doesn't come by observation (Luke 17:20).

In the Old Testament we hear of strategies concocted against the Lord's people that were premised on limiting the Holy One of Israel. The idea of restricting God to certain domains is hardly new: the Syrians bought into this fiction, to their ultimate dismay:

And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord. (I Kings 20:28)

However, the equivalent position adopted by the Syrians is often co-opted, in different guises, by compromised Christians today. It may not be a geographical distinction between hills and plains, such as was invoked by the Syrian strategists, but it often has identical import. The Lord is the God of the internal affairs of churches, but not Lord over anything outside those sanctuaries. Ergo, who would know that He is the Lord if He has abandoned much of the world to run on its own volition, focusing His scepter upon the church as the only domain worth His time and effort?

It appears that we have failed to appreciate the lesson in 1 Kings 20 concerning the belittling description of the Lord God voiced by the Syrians. It's a great story, but are we not in league with the Syrians when we continue to limit our battle to the narrow canyon without bothering to take God's claims over all the world seriously? What we rather find is that someone other than Christ has effective preeminence over all things.

It has always been true that Satan only wins battles when Christians forfeit the battleground. If Christians were to turn and fight for every square inch of creation, as Kuyper had put it, we would sooner see those domains reflect Christ's glory rather than man's disobedience.

There is a famous quotation to the effect that if someone doesn't defend God's kingdom at the very point it is being attacked, then we're not really defending God's kingdom no matter how active we are in other battlefields. This quotation is, sadly, misused in our day.

How so? The proper point is that when a line of attack against God and/or His people opens up, we must not collectively ignore it: that, too, must become part of the active battlefield we are to contend in. In other words, we cannot ignore the new breakout of hostilities against Christ and His rule: He must have a living voice raised in defense of the Truth in that battlefield. The quote should rightly be *adding an obligation* onto our shoulders.

Sadly, it is too often interpreted to be *limiting our obligation* to the designated battlefield, and denigrating all the other battles that are in progress across the battlefield (intellectual, philosophical, spiritual) between the unregenerate and regenerate, between the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. In this perspective, we find ourselves again being positioned in a narrow canyon.

It should be noted, from a tactical point of view, that an enemy usually loves to have his opposition all stuck inside a narrow canyon: this makes it so much easier to attack them, and that in two ways: (1) the enemy doesn't have to expend energy to protect the rest of reality from advancing Christian influence; and (2) keeping all the Christians in one place makes the battle so much more convenient. Just bomb the canyon and be done with them. And human-

istic philosophy is designed to do just that: keep Christians out of the vastness of reality and sequester them inside the narrow canyon where only the one question – does God exist – holds sway. The rest of reality is assumed to be operating just fine without God's existence. It showcases the success of godlessness, so far as serious humanists are concerned.

Conversely, by restricting their activities to the narrow canyon, Christians have fewer and fewer cultural victories to showcase the glories of God's kingdom when it penetrates the world like leaven hidden in three whole measures of meal (Matt. 13:33).

One example I bring up regularly (to showcase it) is how Israel conquered poverty during the Maccabean era by implementing the poor tithe of Deuteronomy 14. The promise of Deut. 15:4 of having “no poor among you” was achieved for several decades, with Israel falling back into its old disobedience once again by the time Christ walked through the Holy Land, confronting a poor widow who had only two mites to throw into the temple treasury. But no nation on earth had ever conquered poverty before, or since, and Israel did it God's way, not by mounting a secular war on poverty such as Lyndon B. Johnson initiated to build his Great Society.

If Christians only see other Christians fighting in the narrow canyon, and not on the great continents of human thought and activity that fill the earth, many will assume “this is where the battle is: I'm right to stay here and not branch out.” We end up being interested only in “taking every thought captive to Christ in this narrow canyon, but that's it.” And this is a defeat, one that our defective theologies have helped to contrive.

For the fact of the matter is, the narrow canyon is going to shrink, if it hasn't been shrinking already. I've commented repeatedly how pertinent the aphorism, “Honey, We've Shrunk the Gospel” is for today's Christian. Instead of the Great Commission being seen in the most expansive terms,⁸ it becomes subject to the most astonishing distortions to harmonize with our slothful natures.⁹

PREEMINENCE OVER LIMITED THINGS

It comes as something of a surprise to learn how many Christian leaders are willing to subtly twist the teaching of Colossians 1:18 concerning Christ having “the preeminence over all things.” The word preeminence is sometimes rendered “supremacy,” but the important take away is that it is to apply to *all things*. In other words, it applies beyond the narrow canyon we prefer to limit our fighting to.

One wonders if we like to fight in the narrow canyon because it is easier than taking *every thought captive*. I've recently commented that Dr. Rushdoony's *Roots of Reconstruction* had covered over 430 diverse topics, and that our obligation is to both widen and deepen the scope of Christ's victories which He would put into the hands of His faithful people as they bring God's Word and His Law into play in this world. The Great Commission is not a mediocre commission, and Christ is in the business of pushing back the darkness (1 John 2:8). It is the entering in of His word that brings light (Ps. 119:130), and we are told that darkness will prevail wherever the law and testimony is obliterated. “To the law and the testimony: if they speak not according to these, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). Note that, outside of the narrow canyon, this darkness-inducing effect prevails due to Christian dereliction.

So limiting the fight to the narrow canyon, which fails to recognize that *every point of human knowledge is to be fought over and contended for*, guarantees that the world will be swathed in thick darkness. Teaching – or implying by our inaction or indolence – that Christ really has preeminence over a restricted set of things is not only a counsel of despair, it is a gift to the Enemy. It has always been true that Satan only wins battles when Christians forfeit the battleground. If Christians were to turn and fight for every square inch of creation, as Kuyper had put it, we would sooner see those domains reflect Christ's glory rather than man's disobedience.

We must, therefore, insist that in every domain, but especially in the domains of thought and knowledge, Christ must have the preeminence in all things, which means not only supremacy but priority. God must

be first in our thinking, the starting point for cognition and reasoning, and His Word must govern all aspects of reality by our taking it seriously for ourselves and then applying it across the globe with diligence and care.

If we don't pay attention to how *common ground* originates from man's rejection of God's existence (or His relevance, which amounts to the same thing), we will stay in the narrow canyon. We will take for granted (like the humanist does) that the universe is what it is whether or not God exists, which rewrites the title deed for the creation and gives it over to man. Isaiah would surely be shocked at this, given his description of the nations of the world being like the dust of the balance (Isa. 40:15) and "less than nothing," while we think the nations are the most important, crucial components of the world.

This means we need a serious re-orientation. Not only do we not know our enemy well, we don't even know our King well enough to advance His cause in the world. We find ourselves too often in the wrong place at the wrong time, doing things that please man but not God.

The mission is simple: "all things in subjection" to Him (Heb. 2:8). Its simplicity means that theologians must work overtime to excuse the results of their failed engagement of our humanistic culture. The one area where there has been progress (comprehensively consistent Christian education in general, and uncompromised homeschooling in particular) is significant because the *content* of those victories *extend way beyond the narrow canyon*. And this is why humanists and statists routinely attempt to abolish education not controlled by the state. Education is seen as something outside of the narrow canyon, and the humanists would just as soon choke off these dangerous leaks seeping from the ghetto they've consigned Christians to.

ALL OR NOTHING

The parable of the talents is instructive here. *Expansion* from provided resources is expected by our Lord. Five talents should generate ten talents in the hands of the faithful Christian. We should interpret this in the most comprehensive manner. Or

We must contend for all of creation to be brought into subjection to Him. The actual achievement of this goal is achieved by the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit over time, but the part we play in this war over who is sovereign – God or man – sets the stage for the next generation's achievements.

as Dr. Rushdoony had often put it, "The world was not empty when we entered it, and it shouldn't be emptier after our having passed through it." There is an expectation of progress, growth, and return to the Lord for the energy and resources He has bestowed upon us. In fact, we are expected to be at our posts when He calls us home, as Simeon demonstrated (Luke 2:25ff.).

Remember that famous quote about being at the point of attack lest we be found unfaithful to kingdom needs? We need to add one important factor to complete that aphorism. We need to remember, as Van Til demonstrated and Rushdoony popularized for our easier consumption, that *every point of human knowledge and enterprise is under attack*. That is because Christ's creatorship and lordship over every point is *denied by the unregenerate*. That means those areas have been taken by the enemy, who won't easily relinquish them. God can convert His enemies (and He surely does) but He also calls us to contend for the faith once delivered. And one element of that faith is that it either embraces *all or nothing*.

Because if we're willing to give up ground to the enemy – and one way of doing this is with a foolish doctrine of *common ground* – we have yielded the principle that Christ has the preeminence. We have signed a peace treaty with the enemy and given God's creation to the enemy to appease him, and make life easy on ourselves. We must contend for *all of creation* to be brought into subjection to Him. The actual

achievement of this goal is achieved by the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit over time, but the part we play in this war over who is sovereign – God or man – sets the stage for the next generation’s achievements. If we model cowardice for our children, or indifference, or ignorant neglect, we truly end up fighting for nothing.

Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega. Christians usually let Him work during the first six days of Creation, and understand His part at the Consummation, but far too few of us consider that the space between Alpha and Omega *also belongs to Christ*. His enemies contend for everything occurring in the world between its beginning and ending, trying to reserve history and the future as *the domain of the unregenerate*.

What is missed is that Zechariah 14:20-21 informs us that there shall no more be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord of Hosts, and that the entire world, down to the bells on the horses, will be made holy. All will be made holy, and nothing will be left of the unregenerate, who left either regenerate offspring or died out. If the bells of the horses will have *Holiness Unto the Lord* graven upon them, what business do we have fighting only in the narrow canyon? The world is waiting for His people to fight the good fight, in every place, in every field, for the only One who is worthy, that the healing of global holiness might prevail.¹⁰ 🙌

1. R. J. Rushdoony, *Van Til* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), p. 40. Republished in R. J. Rushdoony, *Van Til and the Limits of Reason* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2013), p. 42.

2. *Ibid*, p. 40 (p. 42 in the 2013 edition).

3. *Ibid*.

4. *Ibid*.

5. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/the-ministry-of-reconciliation>

6. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/the-proper-weapons-of-christian-reconstruction>

7. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/regeneration-not-revolution-2>

8. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/medio-cre-commission>

9. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/the-perpetual-kindergarten>

10. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/the-scope-of-healing>

FEARFULNESS

R. J. RUSHDOONY (*A Word In Season*, Vol. 1, pp. 116-117)

Who are the reprobates? This is a question we need to ask, because the Bible tells us who they are in Revelation 21:8. You will find some obviously bad characters on the list, “the abominable,” murderers, whoremongers, and others who obviously belong there, but the first two, who head the list, are very important. They are “the fearful, and unbelieving,” and they are essentially one and the same.

To be fearful means to distrust God’s promises and to put more stock in what the world promises and threatens than what God promises and threatens us with. To be fearful means to believe in man and his power and to disbelieve in God and His power.

We are a fearful and unbelieving generation. We are always fearful where we should not be, and indifferent to God and His power and Word. We are summoned by all of Scripture to believe in the Lord. To believe means to say Amen to, to put our whole life on the line in terms of God’s Word. To believe means that our waking and sleeping, our eating and drinking, our work, rest, worship, and play, the whole of our lives, in brief, is governed by the Lord and His Word.

If we disbelieve God, we believe in man and this world, and our lives are governed by man and the fear of man.

Every man has a faith, in himself, in the state, in other men, but in something. If a man’s faith is in anything other than the Lord, he will be fearful and unbelieving in the eyes of God, fearful of men because he does not believe in the Lord.

To be fearless in the Lord does not require us to be great and powerful men, but only to believe in the great and powerful God. He is our shield and our defender (Ps. 33:20). God therefore allows no excuses for fearfulness. Beware lest you make excuses. 🙌

Humanism is collapsing, but is the Church ready to govern in Christ's name?

Rushdoony predicted the times in which we live which is why he focused the mission of Chalcedon on the great work of Christian Reconstruction. The only remedy to what we face is a return to Christian faith, character, and obedience.

Rushdoony wrote, "The Biblical doctrine of theocracy means the self-government of the Christian man," (*Sovereignty*, p. 31) which means the Christian most needs the resources to equip him for Biblical self-government.

The Chalcedon Foundation is a "think-tank for the self-governing Christian," and our mission is to equip Christian families and churches to apply the faith to every area of life and cultivate faithfulness to God's law and covenant in order that Christ's Kingdom might increase.

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P.O. Box 158 • Vallecito, CA 95251-9989

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Fax: (209) 736-0536

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