

How much did Frame drink from Van Til's apologetic well?

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John Frame says that when he was a student at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1961–64 Cornelius “Van Til became the greatest influence on my apologetics and theology”¹ and that “my own [presuppositional] approach [to apologetics] owes more to Van Til than to anyone else.”²

To see this influence in practice, and also to show Frame's own contribution,³ I have added my view of the sources of Frame's overlooked and helpful *maxims for apologists*⁴ and his most compact *summary of apologetic method*⁵ as follows.⁶

Van Til	=	can be found in Van Til
VTJFclar	=	this can be found in Van Til but has been <i>clarified</i> by Frame
VTJFdev	=	this can be found in Van Til but has been <i>developed</i> by Frame
VTJFrev	=	this can be found in Van Til but has been <i>revised</i> by Frame
JF	=	(essentially) cannot be found in Van Til but comes from Frame

After the maxims and method summary I have given a table of the sources.

¹ “Backgrounds to My Thought” to be published in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009)

² Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 219, n.16, hereinafter FV.

³ Frame is not a clone of Van Til. For instance for how Van Til and Frame differ in their background, approach and style, see John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 16–17, hereinafter CVT. For instance Frame says, “I used my own vocabulary and developed ideas in my own way. They were Van Tillian in content, for the most part, but they did not sound much like Van Til, and they sometimes raised serious objections about his formulations. He was, for some years, a bit suspicious of me on that account” CVT 17.

⁴ Frame gives the “Maxims for Theologians and Apologists” at Appendix G in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), hereinafter DKG. These are “some “do’s” and “don’ts,” based on discussions in DKG” (the cross-references to DKG have not been included here). The “DKG No.” indicates the maxim number in his Appendix (the ones for Theologians that also apply to apologists have been included).

⁵ Taken from FV, 219–223.

⁶ Frame's apologetics can be found most fully in John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: an Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994). The best short introduction is his “Presuppositional Apologetics,” in FV. Also see “Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction” (1999), http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh_frame/PT.Frame.Presupp.Apol.1.pdf and http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh_frame/PT.Frame.Presupp.Apol.2.pdf, and hear his mp3 apologetics lectures at <http://itunes.rts.edu>. For an analysis of his apologetics see, William Edgar's “Frame the Apologist” in the “Frame's and Van Til's Apologetic” to be published in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame*.

Frame's maxims for apologists—relation to Van Til added (Italics added to show, in my view, the <i>basic</i> maxims.)	SOURCE	DKG No.
<i>Do all to the glory of our covenant Lord.</i>	Van Til	1
<i>Do theology—indeed, all your thinking; indeed, all your living—in obedience to God.</i>	Van Til	5
<i>Do not seek to do theology without a personal knowledge of God as your friend through Christ.</i>	VTJFdev	6
<i>Do recognize that unbelievers seek always to avoid, suppress, and hinder the truth. Thus their theological perception, though informed by God's revelation, is not dependable.</i>	Van Til	7
Do not, however, draw simplistic conclusions from the unbeliever's depravity, for example that everything he says is false.	VTJFdev	8
<i>Do trace, in non-Christian thought, the dynamics of rationalism and irrationalism—hopeless positions necessarily connected with unbelief.</i>	Van Til	9
Do seek to justify your assertions, but remember that on some occasions we may believe something without being able to give a justification.	JF	15
<i>Do not seek any justification deeper than the self-attesting authority of Scripture.</i>	Van Til	16
<i>Do reason in a “broad”, rather than a “narrow” circle. Include in your arguments as many facts, as much data as you can.</i>	JF	18
<i>Do reason circularly, even if it seems absurd. Have faith that Scripture is right when it says that the unbeliever really knows God, and that indeed, a God-honoring circle is the only proper, the only rational, way to reason.</i>	Van Til	19
Do let your presuppositions and your faith work in you a sense of certainty; don't resist the process. But remain teachable, also out of faith.	JF	20
Do offer that same certainty to those to whom you witness.	Van Til	21
<i>Do present the facts together with their scriptural interpretations. Do not be embarrassed about using extrabiblical information in theology [and apologetics], if you are interpreting it within a scriptural framework. Do not give the impression that you have reached the “brute facts”, or the truth, apart from Scripture's interpretation of it.</i>	VTJFclar	22
<i>Do present your witness with a goal of nothing less than leading the inquirer to full saving faith.</i>	VTJFclar	23
<i>Do relate your witness to the individual, personal needs of your inquirer, as well as to those needs he shares with everyone.</i>	JF	24
Do point out inconsistencies between the unbeliever's life and his doctrine to show that his unbelief cannot meet his real needs.	JF	25
<i>Do reason with unbelievers only on the basis of Scripture, using Scripture itself in the argument where appropriate.</i>	Van Til	58
Do admit it when you don't know the answer; such ignorance is a <i>strength</i> of our apologetic.	JF	59
Do make judicious use of evidentialist works in apologetics, presenting their facts together with the biblical interpretations of those facts.	VTJFdev	60
Do “use the prophets” of unbelievers to bring to their attention the truth that they have suppressing.	VTJFdev	61
<i>Do be flexible in the form you use to communicate.</i>	JF	62

Summary of Frame’s Apologetic Method—relation to Van Til added	SOURCE
Presuppositionalists apologetics focuses on ... Biblical teachings and draws various conclusions in regard to apologetic method:	
1. The goal of apologetics is to evoke or strengthen faith not merely to bring intellectual persuasion. ... the apologist seeks above all to be a channel through whom God’s Spirit can bring repentance (including intellectual repentance) and faith.	VTJFdev
2. Apologists, therefore must resist temptations to contentiousness or arrogance. ... First Peter 3:15–16 focuses, surprisingly, not on the brilliance, cogency or eloquence of apologists, but on their character: they must answer unbelievers with “gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.” Peter here tells us that a consistent Christian life plays a major role in the work of apologetics.	VTJFdev
3. Our apologetic should take special pains to present God as he really is: the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, who alone saves his people from their sins.	Van Til
4. As such, our argument should be <i>transcendental</i> . That is, it should present the biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes argument possible.	Van Til
5. We can reach this transcendental conclusion by many kinds of specific arguments, including many of the traditional ones (including “evidential apologetics” all of which “presuppositionalism ... seeks to supplement, clarify and sharpen” [n.18]).	VTJFrev
6. Negatively, we should not say things to the unbeliever that tend to reinforce his pretense to autonomy or neutrality.	VTJFclar
7. The actual arguments we use in apologetic witness will vary considerably, depending on who we are talking to. Apologetics is “person variable.”	VTJFdev ⁷
8. It is especially useful when we can show how the errors of non-Christian worldviews arise, not merely from logical mistakes or factual inaccuracy, but firm religious rebellion.	VTJFdev

⁷ I debated whether *person variable apologetics* was a revision of Van Til or just from John Frame but decided on the basis of CVT, 182–183 and 325–26 to put it as a development of Van Til.

Sources of Frame's apologetics	For all Maxims	For basic Maxims	For Method Summary
"Van Til" – from Van Til	8	7	2
"VTJFclar" – from Van Til but <i>clarified</i> by Frame	2	2	1
"VTJFdev" – from Van Til but <i>developed</i> by Frame	4	1	4
<i>Subtotal of from Van Til without revision</i>	<i>14 = 67%</i>	<i>10 = 77%</i>	<i>7 = 88%</i>
"VTJFrev" – from Van Til but <i>revised</i> by Frame	–	–	1
"JF" – from Frame	7	3	–
<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>8</i>

So the depth of influence of Van Til on Frame's apologetic can be seen from 77% of Frame's maxims and 88% of his method are from Van Til without revision.⁸ He did drink deeply from the apologetic well of Van Til. But notice that: Frame also clarifies, develops and somewhat revises⁹ Van Til's apologetic; and that Frame's developments, as well as his original maxims, mostly relate to the practicalities of doing apologetics.

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⁸ Others would probably reclassify some of sources but I would not expect the overall conclusions I have given to be materially different.

⁹ Although, this revision strikes at the heart of Van Til's apologetic—the nature of arguing transcendentally and the validity of traditional arguments. See my essay "Frame's and Van Til's Apologetic" to be published in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame*, for an assessment of this.