

A Theology of Lordship

*The*

DOCTRINE

*of the*

KNOWLEDGE

OF GOD

JOHN M. FRAME

THE DOCTRINE  
OF THE KNOWLEDGE  
OF GOD

# A THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

A SERIES BY JOHN M. FRAME

*The Doctrine of God*

*The Doctrine of the Christian Life*

*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*

*The Doctrine of the Word of God*

THE DOCTRINE  
OF THE KNOWLEDGE  
OF GOD

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JOHN M. FRAME

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# Analytical Outline

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## Preface

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This book was written as a text for my course at Westminster Theological Seminary in California called *The Christian Mind*. The course, an introduction to theology and apologetics, begins with a brief introduction to the Reformed faith, which is followed by a unit on the Word of God, and ends with discussions of some problems of apologetics (e.g., the existence of God, the problem of evil). In between those two units—Word of God and problems of apologetics—comes a section on the theology of knowledge (Christian epistemology if you will), which is the subject of this volume.

The arrangement of my course will explain why in this book I am so dogmatic as to assume Reformed theology without argument, especially on matters such as biblical inerrancy. I trust that in the future I may be able to publish materials that cover the other areas of my course. If the reader is not sympathetic to my general theological views, however, I do ask his patience; he may well find that some of this material will be helpful to him nevertheless. Also, I hope that this book will help some readers from other theological orientations to see an orthodox, Reformed position “from the inside.” I hope to show such readers, in some measure, the richness of the theological resources available to Reformed orthodoxy and thereby to make that position more attractive to them. Thus, rather indirectly, this book constitutes a sort of argument for my theological position—to those readers willing to give me some benefit of the doubt.

Indeed, readers of all theological positions will have to give me some of that benefit! As I read over the manuscript, there seems to be something in



it to create difficulties for almost every kind of reader. Some of it is far too difficult for those without theological training (e.g., the sections on anti-abstractionism and the basis of logic); other parts may seem too simple for those *with* theological training (e.g., the material on apologetic method). Some parts merely gather together traditional ideas that have been stated by other authors (e.g., Van Tillian presuppositionalism, Van Til's rationalist-irrationalist dialectic). Other parts are rather new, at least in an orthodox context (theology as application, multiperspectivalism, appreciation for subjectivism, anti-anti-abstractionism, critiques of biblical and systematic theology, polemic against the ideal of total precision in theology, attack on word-level criticism, attack on "logical order," etc.). Thus I manage to offend both the traditionalists and the avant-garde.

Also, I keep feeling that at most points in the book more argument would be helpful. Yet the book is already terribly long, and one of my theses is that theological argument has to start and stop somewhere. Not everything can be argued to everyone's satisfaction. I do believe that for those readers willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, the book is sufficient to present at least the main lines of an adequate argument for its positions. For those who are not willing to give me that benefit—well, I may not be the one suited to help you.

Another group I possibly may have offended is women readers or at least women (and men) who share certain current feminist ideas about the use of language. On the one hand, our language is changing somewhat in a nonsexist direction, and I have often found myself writing "human beings" or "persons," rather than "men," in certain contexts. On the other hand, I confess that I have not always avoided the generic masculine pronouns; I have not always written "he or she" in place of the traditional "he" when referring to an indefinite subject. I have, for example, referred to "the theologian" as "he," rather than as "he or she" or (as often in recent publications) as "she."

My practice does not reflect a belief that women cannot be theologians. Quite the contrary. For according to this book, everyone is a theologian! I do believe that only men are called to the teaching eldership of the church, but the interest of this book is broader than that. Why, then, do I resist, to some extent, the trend toward "nonsexist" language? (1) To use "he or she" in place of "he" as a generic pronoun still sounds awkward to me. Possibly that will change in ten or twenty years, but I am writing in 1986. (2) The English language is complete without the new circumlocutions. The generic use of the masculine pronoun does not exclude women. (Look up *he* in the dictionary.) Thus the new language is linguistically su-

perfluous. (3) Theologically, I believe that God ordained man to represent woman in many situations (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3), and so the generic masculine pronoun has an appropriateness that is more than merely linguistic. Not that it would be wrong to replace it with “he or she” for some purposes; it would be wrong, however, to condemn the older language. (4) I realize that language changes and that one must, to some extent, “go with the flow.” I resent attempts, however, to change language in the interest of a political ideology, especially one that I do not entirely agree with! I feel an obligation to accept linguistic change when it arises out of the “grass roots,” out of some cultural consensus. When people try to impose it through political pressure, however, I believe that I have a right, for a time at least, to resist. (5) Are women offended by the generic pronouns? I doubt that many of them are. Probably the ones offended are mostly “professional” feminists. I do not believe, in any case, that women have a *right* to be offended, for the generic language, in fact, does not exclude them (see (2), above). Furthermore, I think that the professional feminists themselves are guilty of insulting women when they claim that this language is offensive. For they are saying, in effect, that women do not understand the English language, because they are offended by language which, according to the dictionary, is nonoffensive. (6) Most importantly, this is not a book about “women’s issues,” and therefore I do not want to use locutions that will distract the reader’s attention, making him (or her!) think about women’s rights when I want him to think about, for example, situational justification.

For many readers, this book will be a reference text. Few will bother to read it all the way through (though I may force my students to do so!). That is fine, but such readers should recognize that the book is a connected argument and that material toward the end may be a trifle bewildering (though not entirely unhelpful) to one who has not read the preceding sections. But such directions may be superfluous. Most readers, I trust, read with common sense.

I wish to acknowledge the help of many who have contributed to my thinking in general and to this book in particular. Thanks to my mother and (now deceased) father who tolerated a lot of theological nonsense from me in my formative years. To Bob Kelley and Alberta Meadowcroft, who first excited my fascination with God, with Jesus Christ, and with the Christian life. To John Gerstner, who first introduced me to serious and rigorous theological thinking and who showed me that such thinking was possible within, even demanded by, an orthodox Christian confession. To Pastor Ed Morgan, Dr. Donald B. Fullerton, and the Princeton Evangelical

Fellowship, who challenged me to study Scripture in depth, reminding me that God's answers are the most important in all areas of life. To two Princeton professors: Dennis O'Brien, a slightly unorthodox Roman Catholic who started me thinking in a "perspectival" direction, and the late Walter Kaufmann, who for all his militant anti-Christianity managed to teach me that philosophy and theology could be fun. To Cornelius Van Til, the chief intellectual influence of my seminary years and beyond. To other seminary professors, especially Edmund P. Clowney, Meredith G. Kline, and John Murray, who showed me riches in the Scriptures beyond my most fantastic imaginings. To Paul Holmer, my advisor at Yale, who planted many seed thoughts in my head (doubtless he will be appalled to discover what I have done with them!). To many students and colleagues with whom I have had profitable discussions, especially Greg Bahnsen, Vern Poythress, Jim Jordan, Carl Ellis, Susanne (Klepper) Borowik, and Rich Bledsoe. To John Hughes, who painstakingly edited and typeset this volume and made a great number of valuable suggestions. To Lois Swagerty and Jan Crenshaw, who typed portions of the manuscript. To all the Dombeks and all the Laverells, whose Christian friendship nurtured and strengthened me in many ways. To the faculties and boards of the Westminster Theological Seminaries (of Philadelphia and Escondido) for their many encouragements and for their patience in accepting me for so many years as a (relatively) unpublished professor. To Dick Kaufmann, whose precious ministry of the gospel has constantly renewed my faith. To my dearest Mary, the kindest, sweetest, most godly human being I know, whose love has sustained me and has motivated me to persevere in my work. And finally, "to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen" (Rev. 1:5, 6).

## INTRODUCTION

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# Epistemology and the Theological Curriculum

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Calvin's *Institutes* begins not with a discussion of scriptural authority or of the doctrine of God, as have most Reformed theologies since Calvin, but with a discussion of the "knowledge of God." The topic with which an author begins a book is not necessarily "central" or "foundational" to his thinking, but clearly the *Institutes* begins with a subject very close to Calvin's heart. In the *Institutes*, "knowledge of God" is both basic and distinctive, since there is very little that compares with it in the writings of Calvin's predecessors or successors. The point is not that in his historical context only Calvin wrote extensively about knowing God. Many people wrote on this subject as they considered the knowability and incomprehensibility of God, human reason, faith, illumination, revelation, Scripture, tradition, preaching, the sacraments, prophecy, the Incarnation, and so forth. And of course many people wrote about salvation, which (as we shall see) is virtually equivalent to the "knowledge of God," viewed from a certain perspective. Yet it seems that Calvin was uniquely fond of the phrase "knowledge of God," and that fondness signals a preference that is more than merely linguistic. For Calvin, "knowledge of God" was a "foundational" concept, a concept by means of which he intended to bring all of his other concepts into focus, a concept by which he sought to make all his other concepts understood. The "knowledge of God" is not the only "central" concept in Calvin, nor is it necessarily the most important. Unlike many modern writers, Calvin was not a "theologian of" this or that (the Word, personal encounter, self-understanding, crisis, process, hope, liberation, covenant, the Resurrection, or even "knowledge of



God”). Yet Calvin recognized “knowledge of God” as one important *perspective* through which the whole Bible can be helpfully understood, as one useful means of summing up the whole biblical message, as well as being a key to certain specific areas of biblical teaching.

Where did Calvin get this remarkable idea? Doubtless through his own study of Scripture. We tend to forget how often in Scripture God performs His mighty acts so that men will “know” that He is Lord (cf. Exod. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29f.; 10:2; 14:4, 18; 16:12; Isa. 49:23, 26; 60:16; etc.). We tend to forget how often Scripture emphasizes that although in one sense all people know God (cf. Rom. 1:21), in another sense such knowledge is the exclusive privilege of God’s redeemed people and indeed the ultimate goal of the believer’s life. What could be more “central” than that? But in our modern theologizing—orthodox and liberal, academic and popular—this language does not come readily to our lips. We speak much more easily about being saved, born again, justified, adopted, sanctified, baptized by the Spirit; about entering the kingdom, dying and rising with Christ; and about believing and repenting than we do about knowing the Lord. For Calvin, there was no such reticence. He was quite at home with the scriptural language; he made it truly his own. And in doing so, he unlocked a rich treasury of biblical teaching of which we are largely ignorant today.

But we do hunger for it. Questions about knowledge—epistemological questions—are a preoccupation of our time. The basic questions raised by Hume and Kant have made modern philosophers (as well as scientists, theologians, artists, sociologists, psychologists, etc.) deeply obsessed by the problems of what we can know and how we can know. Such topics also frequently dominate discussions among nonacademic Christians: How can I know that the Bible is true? How can I know that I am saved? How can I know God’s will for my life? How can we, with twentieth-century American biases and prejudices, really know what Scripture means? The biblical doctrine of the knowledge of God was not concocted as an answer to Hume and Kant or to modern skepticism in general or to ancient skepticism, for that matter. It primarily addresses questions of a different sort. But it *does* also address the modern questions in a powerful way.

And there are signs that God (in His mysterious historical slowness, which is never too late) is teaching these truths again to His church. Many useful articles have been written in biblical journals and dictionaries about the concept of “knowledge” in Scripture. And there are even some books on this topic (see the Bibliography). F. Gerald Downing’s *Has Christianity a*

*Revelation?*<sup>1</sup> (he answers, No) goes to some rather absurd extremes but along the way says some very helpful things about revelation and knowledge in Scripture. Cornelius Van Til's apologetic has taken some giant steps toward reforming our Christian epistemology and theological method. These developments, however, have not profoundly affected the contemporary teaching of systematic theology or the preaching and popular theologizing of our day.

Therefore as part of a solution, following Calvin (but departing from much Reformed theology since his time), I have introduced a formal unit on the "knowledge of God" as part of my teaching in systematic theology. The idea came to me ten years ago, when Westminster Seminary determined to combine its first-semester theology course (which includes units on Introduction to Theology, The Word of God, and Revelation, Inspiration and Inerrancy) with its first-semester apologetics course. Both courses were deeply concerned with epistemology. In the theology course, we asked about the nature of theology and about theological method and structure, as well as about God's self-communication to us in nature, Word, and Spirit. In the apologetics course, we dealt with the unbeliever's knowledge of God, its differences from the believer's knowledge, and the means by which God replaces the former with the latter. Therefore it seemed pedagogically sound to introduce a unit on epistemology into the combined theology-apologetics course, and it seemed an ideal means to reintroduce into our "system" much of the biblical teaching on the knowledge of God. And incidentally, it also seemed a useful method of presenting some fresh ideas on what it ought to mean in our day to be "Reformed," to be followers of Calvin. Those purposes, then, define what my class lectures and what this book intend to do.

But where should the epistemology unit be placed in the larger structure of the theology-apologetics course that includes the "Word of God" and various apologetic topics? Generally, questions of theological encyclopedia (i.e., Where in our system do we discuss x—before what and after what?) bore me; they are not nearly as important as some people make them out to be. Most often, they are questions about pedagogy much more than they are questions of theological substance; the answers depend as much on the nature of a particular audience or situation as on the nature of the biblical truth itself. There is no *one point* in the theological system at which epistemology must be discussed. My decision to discuss epis-

1. London: SCM Press, 1964.

temology after the introductory unit on the Word of God, however, is based on the following lines of thought.

One could argue that the doctrine of the knowledge of God ought to be a student's first introduction to systematic theology. After all, it seems that one must know what knowing is before one goes about the business of knowing specific things. One must know what theology is before one can do theology. Right? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, there is certainly much virtue in the idea of discussing epistemology toward the beginning of a student's theological course of study, since it does provide him with concepts and methods that will enrich the rest of his study. On the other hand, the lack of philosophical, linguistic, and catechetical background of many seminary students makes me wonder if first-year students are ready to tackle an area of study as difficult as this can be. And more seriously, there is a sense in which students are not ready to define "theology" until they have done it, just as they are not ready to define "knowledge" until they have done some knowing. Contrary to our intellectualist prejudices, the practice of something generally precedes its definition. (People were writing poetry and thinking logically long before Aristotle defined poetry and formulated a logic.) Can you do theology without knowing what theology is? Of course, just as you can tell time without having a definition of "time," just as you can walk or eat or breathe without being able to give precise definitions of those activities. And sometimes we *must* do something before we can define it. It is scarcely conceivable that anyone could define "seeing" without ever having seen anything. And if a blind man were able, through reading in braille dictionaries, to define sight, imagine how much deeper his understanding of it would be after his sight were restored. A student is not ready, in my view, to appreciate definitions of "theology" or of the "knowledge of God" unless he has already done some theology and unless he already knows God!

Thus I place this unit second—after the unit on the Word of God. That satisfies the legitimate desire to have it toward the beginning of the curriculum (though it does not solve the problem of the inadequate background of many students), and it does give the students some experience in doing theology before they learn, in a formal sense, what theology is. Furthermore, this procedure has the advantage of supporting a major theme of our study: the knowledge of God is a human response to God's Word and is justified by its conformity thereunto. Word of God, then knowledge of God; that is the order both in experience and in our curriculum.

Within the class unit and within this book, the structure looks like this: Part One: The Objects of Knowledge (What do we know?); Part Two: The

Justification of Knowledge (On what basis do we know?); Part Three: The Methods of Knowledge (How do we know?). These questions are not independent. To answer one, you must have some answers in the other areas, too. For example, if you are going to define the objects of knowledge (Part One), you cannot do so unless you do it on the right basis (Part Two), using a proper method (Part Three). In theology, as in other disciplines, it very often happens that questions are interdependent in this way. This does not mean, however, that we must know all the answers before we can know any. God has revealed His truth clearly, and all of us have some knowledge in each area on which we can build. We will begin with the first question, use it to help us answer the second, then find that the second question gives us a fuller understanding of the first one, and so forth. The interdependence of the questions will thus help our study, not hinder it.

One last introductory comment: the material in this book is not intended to do all the work of a philosophical epistemology. Of course, there will be some overlap between this book and works on the theory of knowledge, but I do not intend to go into detail on topics such as the relations between sense data, a priori concepts, sensation, perception, abstraction, and so forth. Studies of such topics have their place (which is *not* to serve as our ultimate source of epistemological certainty), and they can be valuable, especially when developed on Christian assumptions. But our purposes are different.



PART ONE

---

THE OBJECTS  
OF KNOWLEDGE

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What is the “object” of the knowledge of God? In knowing God, what do we know? Well, *God*, of course! So what remains to be said? Much.

In the first place, it is important that we be clear on what kind of God we are seeking to know. There are many different kinds of knowledge, and differences in the justification and methods of knowledge are often based on differences in the objects that we know. We come to know our friends in different ways from the ways that we come to know the Middle Ages; knowing the population of San Diego is different from knowing Bach’s Brandenburg Concerti. Our criteria, methods, and goals in knowing will depend on what we seek to know. Knowing God is something utterly unique, since God himself is unique. Though many beings are called gods by men, there is only one living and true God, and He is radically different from anything in creation. We are not seeking to know just any god; we are seeking to know the Lord Jehovah, the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we must spend a bit of time in the “doctrine of God,” even though, as I indicated in the preface, in my teaching and writing that topic follows the doctrine of the knowledge of God, the topic of this book.

In the second place, we do not come to know God, or anything else, in a vacuum. In knowing God, we come to know His relations to the world and to many things in the world, especially to ourselves. We cannot know God without understanding some of those relations: the biblical God is the



God of the covenant, the Creator and sustainer of the world, the Redeemer and judge of men. So we cannot know God without knowing other things at the same time, hence the plural *objects* in the title of this section. And, quite importantly, we cannot know other things rightly without knowing God rightly. Thus theistic epistemology, the doctrine of the knowledge of God, implies a general epistemology, a doctrine of the knowledge of everything. And so in this section we will have to discuss, at least in a limited way, all the “objects” of human knowledge.

A word to some of you who have studied epistemology before: by beginning this book with a discussion of the “objects” of knowledge, I am not intending to erect some great wall of separation between “subject” and “object.” To do so would be to destroy all knowledge and would be entirely contrary to Scripture. You will see that I am in greater danger of relating subject and object too closely than I am of illegitimately “dichotomizing” them. Still, one has to start somewhere; he cannot relate everything to everything else all at once, for otherwise he would be God. Thus I start with the “object” of knowledge, and in time we shall see how intimately that object is bound up with the knowing subject. If someone argues that even to distinguish these is to presuppose some illegitimate separation, I reply that that is nonsense. One may make a distinction without separating at all in any meaningful sense, for example, between morning star and evening star, between California and the Golden State.

In this section I shall discuss (1) God, the Covenant Lord, (2) God and the World, and (3) God and Our Studies. In those three chapters we will discuss God, His law, creation, man as God’s image, and the “objects” of knowledge in theology, philosophy, science, and apologetics. In each of these disciplines we will ask what it is that we seek to know.

## CHAPTER ONE

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# God, the Covenant Lord

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Who is this God that we seek to know? Scripture describes Him in many ways, and it is dangerous to seize on any of them as being more basic or more important than others. In seeking to summarize Scripture's teachings, however, we can certainly do worse than to use the concept of divine "lordship" as our point of departure. "Lord" (*Yahweh* in Hebrew) is the name by which God identified himself at the beginning of His covenant with Israel (Exod. 3:13-15; 6:1-8; 20:1f.). It is the name (*kurios* in Greek) that has been given to Jesus Christ as head of the New Covenant, as head of His redeemed body (John 8:58; Acts 2:36; Rom. 14:9). The fundamental confessions of faith of both testaments confess God—Christ—as Lord (Deut. 6:4ff.; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). God performs His mighty acts "that you may know that I am the Lord" (cf. Exod. 7:5; 14:4, 18; the references in the Introduction; and Pss. 83:18; 91:14; Isa. 43:3; 52:6; Jer. 16:21; 33:2; Amos 5:8). At critical points in redemptive history, God announces "I am the Lord, I am he" (Isa. 41:4; 43:10-13, 25; 44:6; 48:12; cf. 26:4-8; 46:3f.; Deut. 32:39f., 43; Ps. 135:13; Hos. 12:4-9; 13:4ff.; Mal. 3:6, which allude to Exod. 3:13-15). In such passages, not only "Lord" but also the emphasis on the verb "to be" recall the name-revelation of Exodus 3:14. Jesus also frequently alludes to the "I am" in presenting His own character and office (John 4:26; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5ff.; cf. 6:48; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 14; 11:25; 12:46; 14:6; 15:1, 5). One of the most remarkable testimonies to Jesus' deity is the way in which He and His disciples identified Him with *Yahweh* of Exodus 3—a name so closely associated with God that at one point the Jews became afraid even to pro-

nounce it. To summarize those points: throughout redemptive history, God seeks to identify himself to men as Lord and to teach and demonstrate to them the meaning of that concept. “God is Lord”—that is the message of the Old Testament; “Jesus Christ is Lord”—that is the message of the New.

## A. THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF LORDSHIP

What is divine lordship? Little can be learned from the etymologies of *Yahweh*, *adonai*, or *kurios*. For one thing, those etymologies are uncertain (especially that of *Yahweh*), and furthermore, etymology is not always a reliable guide to meaning. The English *nice*, for example, comes from the Latin *nescius*, which means ignorant; the meanings of the two words are very different! Meanings of words are discovered through an investigation of their use, and such investigation does prove fruitful in the study of the lordship vocabulary in Scripture. My own study can be summarized as follows.

### (1) LORDSHIP AND COVENANT

First of all, lordship is a covenantal concept. “Lord” is the name God gives to himself as head of the Mosaic Covenant and the name given to Jesus Christ as head of the New Covenant (on this, see the passages cited earlier). We may, therefore, define divine lordship as covenant headship.

*Covenant* may refer to a contract or agreement among equals or to a type of relation between a lord and his servants. Divine-human covenants in Scripture, of course, are of the latter type. In the most prominent ones, God as covenant Lord selects a certain people from among all the nations of the earth to be His own. He rules over them by His law, in terms of which all who obey are blessed and all who disobey are cursed. Yet the covenant is not merely law; it is also grace. It was God’s grace, or unmerited favor, by which the covenant people were chosen. And since all men are sinners, it is only by God’s grace that there will be any covenant blessing. Even the reprobate—those who do not receive blessing—are vessels of grace, means that God uses to fulfill His gracious purposes (Rom. 9:22-23).

In a broad sense, all of God’s dealings with creation are covenantal in character. Meredith Kline<sup>1</sup> and others have observed that the creation

1. See Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980).

narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 is parallel in important respects to other narratives that describe the establishment of covenants. During the creation week, all things, plants, animals, and persons are appointed to be covenant servants, to obey God's law, and to be instruments (positively or negatively) of His gracious purpose. Thus everything and everybody is in covenant with God (cf. Isa. 24:5: all the "inhabitants of the earth" have broken the "everlasting covenant"). The Creator-creature relation is a covenant relation, a Lord-servant relation. When the Lord singled out Israel as His special people to be Lord over them in a peculiar way, He was not giving them an absolutely unique status; rather, He was calling them essentially into the status that all men occupy yet fail to acknowledge. Israel, to be sure, was given certain unique privileges (the land of Palestine, the institutions of sacrifice, prophet, priest, king, etc.), and God used Israel in a unique way to bring redemption (Christ) to the world. Thus Israel had certain unique responsibilities, portraying to the world through its diet, clothing, calendar, and so forth, the nature of the redemption to come. But essentially, Israel was simply a servant of God, like everyone else. This is only to say that God is Lord of all, that in all His relations with the world He speaks and acts as Lord.

## (2) TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

If God is covenant *head*, then He is exalted above His people; He is transcendent. If He is *covenant* head, then He is deeply involved with them; He is immanent. Note how beautifully these two concepts fit together when understood biblically.

Historically, terrible problems have developed with concepts of transcendence and immanence. The transcendence of God (His exaltation, His mysteriousness) has been understood as God's being infinitely removed from the creation, being so far from us, so different from us, so "wholly other" and "wholly hidden" that we can have no knowledge of Him and can make no true statements about Him. Such a god, therefore, has not revealed—and perhaps cannot reveal—himself to us. He is locked out of human life, so that for practical purposes we become our own gods. God says nothing to us, and we have no responsibilities to Him.

Similarly, the concept of immanence has been distorted in non-Christian thought, even in some would-be Christian theologies. Immanence has been understood to mean that God is virtually indistinguishable from the world, that when God enters the world He becomes so "worldly" that He cannot be found. The "Christian atheists" used to say that God aban-

doned His divinity and no longer exists as God. Less “radical” thinkers, like Barth and Bultmann, argued that though God still exists, His activity cannot be identified in space and time, that it affects all times and places equally and none in particular. Thus, in effect, there is no revelation; we have no responsibility before God.

Those false concepts of transcendence and immanence fit together in a peculiar way: both satisfy sinful man’s desire to escape God’s revelation, to avoid our responsibilities, to excuse our disobedience. Yet at bottom they are inconsistent with one another. How can God be infinitely far removed from us and wholly identical to us at the same time? Furthermore, neither of those concepts is even coherent. If God is “wholly other,” then how can we know or say that He is “wholly other”? What right do we have to do theology at all if that is the case? And if God is indistinguishable from the world, why should the theologian even bother to speak of God? Why not simply speak of the world? Is it faith that validates such talk? Faith based on what? Can such faith be more than an irrational leap in the dark?

But if transcendence is covenant headship, and if immanence is God’s covenant involvement with His people, then we are on solid ground. We are using concepts taught in Scripture, not ones invented by unbelieving philosophers. We are contemplating relations that however mysterious they may be (and they are mysterious) are nevertheless closely analogous to interpersonal relations in everyday life (father-son, ruler-citizen, husband-wife).

The differences between biblical and nonbiblical thought on these questions may be clarified (for some!) by figure 1.

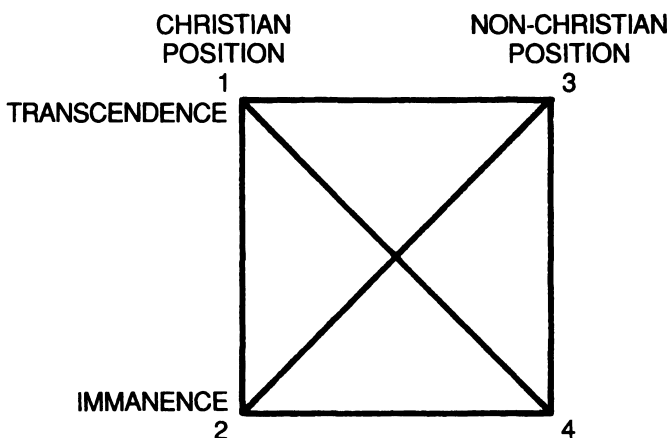


Fig. 1. The square of religious opposition.

The four corners represent four assertions:

1. God is head of the covenant.
2. God is involved as Lord with His creatures.
3. God is infinitely far removed from the creation.
4. God is identical to the creation.

Assertions 1 and 2 are biblical assertions, 3 and 4 are unbiblical. The first assertion represents a biblical view of divine transcendence, the second a biblical view of divine immanence. The third assertion represents a nonbiblical view of transcendence, the fourth a nonbiblical view of immanence. So the two sides distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian approach to the questions of God's immanence and transcendence. The upper half of the square deals with the concept of transcendence, the lower half with immanence. The diagonal lines indicate direct contradictions, showing precisely how the two positions differ: 1 asserts that God is distinct from creation as Lord, 4 denies any distinction at all; 2 asserts a meaningful involvement, 3 denies it. The horizontal lines indicate linguistic similarity: both 1 and 3 can be expressed as views of "transcendence," "exaltation," "mystery," and so forth; both 2 and 4 can be described as forms of "involvement," "immanence," and so forth. Thus there is plenty of room for misunderstanding. Although the two views are diametrically opposed, they can be confused with one another. Even biblical passages can be used in confusing ways. Passages on God's greatness, exaltation, incomprehensibility, and so forth can be applied either to 1 or 3, passages on the divine nearness to either 2 or 4. This shows why 3 and 4, which are essentially non-Christian philosophical speculations, have gained some acceptance among theologians and churches. We must labor mightily to clarify these differences and to attack ambiguity if we are to speak clearly into the modern theological climate.

Vertical lines 1-2 and 3-4 represent the internal structure of each system. As we have seen, 3-4 is inconsistent at a basic level, though 1-2 presents a meaningful, coherent analogy with ordinary experience as interpreted by Scripture.

### (3) CONTROL, AUTHORITY, PRESENCE

Let us explore a bit further the concepts of transcendence (covenant headship) and immanence (covenant involvement). Divine transcendence in Scripture seems to center on the concepts of control and authority. Control is evident in that the covenant is brought about by God's sovereign power. God brings His covenant servants into existence (Isa. 41:4;

43:10-13; 44:6; 48:12f.) and exercises total control over them (Exod. 3:8, 14).<sup>2</sup> As Lord, He sovereignly delivers them (Exod. 20:2) from bondage and directs the whole natural environment (cf. the plagues in Egypt) to accomplish His purposes for them. Authority is God's right to be obeyed, and since God has both control and authority, He embodies both might and right. Over and over, the covenant Lord stresses how His servants must obey His commands (Exod. 3:13-18; 20:2; Lev. 18:2-5, 30; 19:37; Deut. 6:4-9). To say that God's authority is absolute means that His commands may not be questioned (Job 40:11ff.; Rom. 4:18-20; 9:20; Heb. 11:4, 7, 8, 17, *passim*), that divine authority transcends all other loyalties (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 6:4f.; Matt. 8:19-22; 10:34-38; Phil. 3:8), and that this authority extends to all areas of human life (Exod.; Lev.; Num.; Deut.; Rom. 14:32; 1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 3:17, 23). Control and authority—these are the concepts that come to the fore when the Lord is presented to us as exalted above creation, and they are as far removed as possible from any notion of God as “wholly other” or as “infinitely distant.”

God's immanence may be further described as “covenant solidarity.” God elects His covenant people and identifies their goals with His. The heart of the relation is expressed by the words “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12; cf. Exod. 29:45; 2 Sam. 7:14; Rev. 21:27). He names himself as their God—“God of Israel”—thus identifying himself with them. To despise Israel is to despise God, and vice versa. In that way, God is “with them” (Exod. 3:12), near them (Deut. 4:7; cf. 30:14), Immanuel (cf. Gen. 26:3; 28:15; 31:3; 46:4; Exod. 3:12; 33:14; Deut. 31:6, 8, 23; Judg. 6:16; Isa. 7:14; Jer. 31:33; Matt. 28:20; John 17:25; 1 Cor. 3:16ff.; Rev. 21:22). Therefore we will sometimes describe God's “covenant solidarity” as a “presence” or “nearness,” and this nearness, like God's exaltation, is a defining characteristic of God's lordship (Exod. 3:7-14; 6:1-8; 20:5, 7, 12; Ps. 135:13f.; Isa. 26:4-8; Hos. 12:4-9; 13:4ff.; Mal. 3:6; John 8:31-59; cf. Lev. 10:3; Ps. 148:14; Jonah 2:7; Rom. 10:6-8; Eph. 2:17; Col. 1:27). To emphasize the spiritual nearness between himself and Israel, God draws near to them in a spatial sense: on Mount Sinai, in the cloud and pillar in the wilderness, in the land of promise, in the tabernacle and temple. And He draws near in time, as well; He is “now” as well as “here.” When the people are tempted to think of the covenant as an artifact of the distant past, God reminds them that He is the same today as

2. Cf. Exod. 33:18; 34:6; and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1959), 129-34.

He was yesterday. He is the God of the present and future, as much as He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He is the God who is ready now to deliver (cf. Exod. 3:15; 6:8; Isa. 41:4, 10, 13; Deut. 32:7, 39f., 43; Ps. 135:13; Isa. 26:4-8; Hos. 12:4-9; 13:4ff.; Mal. 3:6; John 8:52-58). Thus God's lordship is a deeply personal and practical concept. God is not a vague abstract principle or force but a living person who fellowships with His people. He is the living and true God, as opposed to all the deaf and dumb idols of this world. Knowledge of Him, therefore, is also a person-to-person knowledge. God's presence is not something that we discover through refined theoretical intelligence. Rather, God is unavoidably close to His creation. We are involved with Him all the time.

As controller and authority, God is "absolute," that is, His power and wisdom are beyond any possibility of successful challenge. Thus God is eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and so on. But this metaphysical absoluteness does not (as in non-Christian thought) force God into the role of an abstract principle. The non-Christian, of course, can accept an absolute only if that absolute is impersonal and therefore makes no demands and has no power to bless or curse. There are personal gods in paganism, but none of them is absolute; there are absolutes in paganism, but none is personal. Only in Christianity (and in other religions influenced by the Bible) is there such a concept as a "personal absolute."

Control, authority, personal presence—remember that triad. It will appear often in this book, for I know of no better way to summarize the biblical concept of divine lordship. And since lordship itself is so central, we will be running into this triad again and again. I will refer to those three ideas collectively as the "lordship attributes" of God. Remember, too, the concept of God as transcendent and immanent and as personal absolute (i.e., absolute personality). We will find these categories very useful in summarizing the Christian world view and in contrasting it with the non-Christian one.

It is also important that we see the three lordship attributes as forming a unit, not as separate from one another. God is "simple" in the theological sense (not compounded of parts), so there is a sense in which if you have one attribute you have them all. All of God's attributes involve one another, and that is definitely the case with the lordship triad. God's control, according to Scripture, involves authority, for God controls even the structure of truth and rightness. Control involves presence, for God's power is so pervasive that it brings us face to face with Him in every experience. Authority involves control, for God's commands presuppose His full ability to enforce them. Authority involves presence, for God's com-



mands are clearly revealed and are the means by which God acts in our midst to bless and curse. Presence involves control, lest anything in heaven or earth should keep us from God or Him from us (John 10; Rom. 8). Presence involves authority, for God is never present apart from His Word (cf. Deut. 30:11ff.; John 1:1ff.; etc.; and see my unpublished *Doctrine of the Word of God*).

To summarize, knowing God is knowing Him as Lord, “knowing that I am the Lord.” And knowing Him as Lord is knowing His control, authority, and presence.

## B. LORDSHIP AND KNOWLEDGE

How does the character of God as Lord affect the way in which we know Him? Let us consider several implications of the foregoing discussion.

### (1) KNOWABILITY AND INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

#### a. *Everyone Knows God*

Because God is Lord, He is not only knowable but *known* to all (Rom. 1:21). The “agnostic” who says that he does not know if God exists is deceiving himself and may be seeking to deceive others. God’s covenantal presence is with all His works, and therefore it is inescapable (Ps. 139). Furthermore, all things are under God’s control, and all knowledge, as we will see, is a recognition of divine norms for truth; it is a recognition of God’s authority. Therefore in knowing anything, we know God. Even those without the Scriptures have this knowledge: they know God, they know their obligations to Him (Rom. 1:32), and they know the wrath that is on them because of their disobedience (Rom. 1:18).

But in a more profound sense, only believers know God, only Christians have a knowledge of God that is the essence of eternal life (John 17:3; cf. Matt. 11:27; John 1:14; 1 Cor. 2:9-15; 13:12; 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Tim. 1:12, 14ff.; 1 John 5:20). When this knowledge is in view, it may be said by comparison that unbelievers are ignorant, that they do *not* know God (1 Cor. 1:21; 8:2; 15:34; Gal. 4:8; 1 Thess. 4:5; 2 Tim. 3:7; Titus 1:16; Heb. 3:10; 1 John 4:8).

Although non-Christians know God, they frequently try to deny that He is known or even knowable. They wish to avoid being confronted by

the glory of God, by His demands, and by His judgment; they want no part of His love. Denial of God's knowability stems from a personal, moral situation; views about God—Christian and non-Christian alike—always arise from one's personal relation to God, from a person's ethical and religious orientation.

We can also understand the non-Christian's position by seeing how it is related to his views of transcendence and immanence, as we noted earlier. On the one hand, if God is so far away that He cannot be identified (i.e., transcendent), then of course He cannot be known. On the other hand, if God is so close to the world that He cannot be distinguished from it (i.e., immanent), then again we are ignorant of God. Or perhaps it might be said that since God is so immanent, so "near us," we can know Him perfectly well, with unaided human reason, perhaps (i.e., rationalism), or by some sort of mystical intuition. But the god that is known through such methods will not be the God of Scripture; he will be a god of man's own devising—subject to man's control, yielding to man's own methods of knowing, subject to man's criteria. Thus both the non-Christian transcendence and immanence standpoints deny the knowability of the biblical God. Metaphysics and epistemology are correlative; the nature of God determines His knowability. Once you deny the lordship of God, you will not be able to defend His knowability. Only if God is who Scripture says He is may we claim to know Him. And if He is Lord, then His control, authority, and presence in the world make Him unavoidably knowable, as we have seen.

When non-Christians argue that God is unknowable, they generally appeal to the limitations implicit in human knowledge. They claim, with Hume, that our knowledge is limited to sense perception or, with Kant, that we can only know "appearances" or "phenomena," not reality itself. Or, with more recent (but currently unfashionable) positivism, they argue that we know only what can be established by a certain kind of scientific method. Thus God either must be unknowable (the non-Christian transcendence standpoint), or He must fit within the realms of finite sense-perception—"phenomena" or science—and thus be less than the biblical God (the non-Christian immanence standpoint); or else we must bounce arbitrarily back and forth between these two positions (the approach of modern dialectical theology and philosophy).

It is certainly true that our knowledge is finite. The agnostic has recognized that in some measure, though he illegitimately uses it for his own purposes.<sup>3</sup> But the limitations of human knowledge are, we will see, very

3. We will discuss the limitations of our knowledge in the next section.

different from the kinds of limitations supposed by Hume, Kant, and the positivists. For now, however, we should simply remind ourselves who the Lord is. Because He *controls* all things, God enters His world—our world—without being relativized by it, without losing His divinity. Thus in knowing our world, we know God. Because God is the supreme *authority*, the author of all the criteria by which we make judgments or come to conclusions, we know Him more certainly than we know any other fact about the world. And because God is the supremely *present* one, He is inescapable. God is not shut out by the world; He is not rendered incapable of revealing himself because of the finitude of the human mind. On the contrary, all reality reveals God. The agnostic argument, then, presupposes a nonbiblical concept of God. If God is who Scripture says He is, there are no barriers to knowing Him.

#### b. *Limitations on Our Knowledge of God*

The fact that God is Lord also implies that our knowledge is not on a par with His. As the servant comes to know his Lord, he becomes more and more aware of how little he knows, of how much God transcends the reach of a servant's mind.

Our limitations are of several kinds. First (as we have mentioned), sin motivates fallen people to distort the truth, to flee from it, to exchange it for a lie, and to misuse it. This is one potent source of falsehood and ignorance in our thinking, even in the redeemed mind. Because of Christ, Christians have that problem under control (Rom. 6:14), but it will not completely disappear until the Last Day.

Second, errors in our knowledge arise from immaturity and weakness. Even if Adam had not fallen, the acquisition of knowledge would not have taken place all at once. It would have been a historical process, part of the "subduing of the earth" (Gen. 1:28; cf. 2:19f.). Even Jesus "grew" in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52) and "learned" obedience (Heb. 5:8) in His life as a perfect man. Certainly, then, even apart from sin, human knowledge may be incomplete; we may be ignorant in comparison to what we may know later. Thus I see no reason why even an unfallen race may not have proceeded by the method of trial and error in the continuing quest for knowledge. Error as such need not cause pain or wrongdoing; to make an honest mistake is not in itself sinful. Thus unfallen Adam might have been wrong about some things. And it is much more likely that *we* will make mistakes, because our weakness and immaturity are compounded with the sin of our hearts. Unfallen Adam could not have made a mistake

about his present duty before God, but he might have made other kinds of mistakes, even about theological formulations.<sup>4</sup>

But those limitations are only the beginning. For even a perfect creaturely knowledge, that is, the knowledge of a sinless, mature creature who possesses as much information as a creature could possess, would be a limited knowledge. To be a creature is to be limited in thought and knowledge, as in all other aspects of life. We are limited by our Creator, our Lord. We have a beginning in time, but He does not. We are controlled by Him and subject to His authority; we are the objects of ultimate covenant blessing or cursing, and so the nature of our thought should reflect our status as servants. Our thinking should be “servant-thinking.”

For those reasons, theologians have spoken of God’s “incomprehensibility.” Incomprehensibility is not inapprehensibility (i.e., unknowability), because incomprehensibility presupposes that God is known. To say that God is incomprehensible is to say that our knowledge is never equivalent to God’s own knowledge, that we never know Him precisely as He knows himself.

In the 1940s there was a debate within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church about the concept of God’s incomprehensibility. The major opponents were Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark.<sup>5</sup> Neither man was at his best in this discussion; each seriously misunderstood the other, as we will see. Both, however, had valid concerns. Van Til wished to preserve the Creator-creature distinction in the realm of knowledge, and Clark wished to prevent any skeptical deductions from the doctrine of incomprehensibility, to insist that we really do know God on the basis of revelation. Van Til, therefore, insisted that even when God and man were thinking of the same thing (a particular rose, for example), their thoughts about it were never *identical*—God’s were the thoughts of the Creator, man’s of the crea-

4. Is it sinful to hold the wrong view about limited atonement, for example? Holding a wrong view about this (or any doctrine) would be sinful only if (1) the person has the Bible in his own language, presented at a level suited to his mental capacity, (2) he has had the time and resources to come to a correct conclusion, and (3) he has nevertheless willfully rejected the truth (at some level of his thinking). We should be gentle with those who differ from us; they may not be rebellious or sinful in their disagreement, only immature (in other respects they may surpass us). And, of course, we must always recognize the possibility that we may be wrong, that a brother or sister who disagrees may have something to teach us.

5. See the “Minutes of the Fifteenth General Assembly” (1948) of the OPC for a committee report on this question. Other minutes during that general period also refer to the controversy. Van Til presents his account in his (unpublished) *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 159-93. Fred Klooster analyzed the debate in *The Incomprehensibility of God in the Orthodox Presbyterian Conflict* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1951), a helpful book but not sufficiently sensitive to the ambiguities of the language used in the debate.

ture. Such language made Clark fear skepticism. It seemed to him that if there was some discrepancy between man's "This is a rose" and God's (concerning the same rose), then the human assertion must somehow fall short of the truth, since the very nature of truth is identity with God's mind. Thus if there is a necessary discrepancy between God's mind and man's at every point, it would seem that man could know nothing truly; skepticism would result. Thus the discussion of incomprehensibility—essentially a doctrine about the relation of man's thoughts to God's being—turned in this debate more narrowly into a discussion of the relation between man's thoughts and God's thoughts. To say that God is incomprehensible came to mean that there is some discontinuity (much deeper in Van Til's view than in Clark's) between our thoughts of God (and hence of creation) and God's own thoughts of himself (and of creation).

My contribution to this discussion will be to offer the reader a list of discontinuities between God's thoughts and ours that I believe can be substantiated from Scripture, a list of continuities between the two that ought to be acknowledged, and a list of alleged relations between the two that seem to me to be stated ambiguously and that therefore are capable of being affirmed in one sense and denied in another.

(i) *Discontinuities*. Scripture teaches the following discontinuities between God's thought and ours.

1. God's thoughts are uncreated and eternal; ours are created and limited by time.

2. God's thoughts ultimately determine, or decree, what comes to pass. God's thoughts cause the truths that they contemplate; ours do not. This is the lordship attribute of control in the realm of knowledge.

3. God's thoughts, therefore, are self-validating; they serve as their own criteria of truth. God's thoughts are true simply because they are His. None of us can claim to have such self-attesting thoughts. Our thoughts are not necessarily true, and when they are true, it is because they agree with the thoughts of someone else, namely God, who furnishes the criteria for our thinking. This is the lordship attribute of authority in the area of knowledge.

4. God's thoughts always bring glory and honor to Him because God is always "present in blessing" to himself. Because God is "simple," His thoughts are always self-expressions.<sup>6</sup> Our thoughts are blessed only by vir-

6. See my (unpublished) *Doctrine of the Word of God*. God's thinking and speech are divine attributes and therefore (by the doctrine of simplicity) are identical to God himself. They express, therefore, everything that God is.

tue of God's covenantal presence with us. This is the lordship attribute of presence as applied to knowledge. Note that in 1-4, "incomprehensibility" is an aspect of God's lordship. All the divine attributes can be understood as manifestations of God's lordship, as applications of divine lordship to different areas of human life.

5. God's thoughts are the originals of which ours, at best, are only copies, images. Our thoughts, therefore, would not exist apart from God's covenantal presence (see 4 above).

6. God does not need to have anything "revealed" to Him; He knows what He knows simply by virtue of who He is and what He does. He knows, then, at His own initiative. But all of our knowledge is based on revelation. When we know something, it is because God decided to let us know it, either by Scripture or by nature. Our knowledge, then, is initiated by another. Our knowledge is a result of grace. This is another manifestation of the lordship attribute of "control."<sup>7</sup>

7. God has not chosen to reveal all truth to us. For example, we do not know the future, beyond what Scripture teaches. We do not know all the facts about God or even about creation. In the OPC debate, the difference between God's knowledge and ours was called a "quantitative difference"—God knows more facts than we do.<sup>8</sup>

8. God possesses knowledge in a different way from us. He is immaterial and therefore does not gain knowledge from organs of sense perception. Nor does He carry on "processes of reasoning," understood as temporal sets of actions. Nor is God's knowledge limited by the fallibilities of memory or of foresight. Some have characterized His knowledge as an "eternal intuition," and however we may describe it, it clearly is something quite different from our methods of knowing. In the OPC debate, this discontinuity was called a difference in the "mode" of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

7. Cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 165 (top).

8. Clark expressed this idea by saying that God (more precisely, God's essence) is incomprehensible except as God reveals truths concerning His nature. Van Til rightly replied that apart from revelation, God is not only incomprehensible but inapprehensible (i.e., unknowable; *ibid.*, 168f.). The proper conclusion, then, would be to say that Clark failed to distinguish adequately between incomprehensibility and inapprehensibility or to say that he has an inadequate concept of incomprehensibility. Van Til, however, assumed that Clark was willing to make such a distinction. He understood Clark to say that God is incomprehensible but not inapprehensible apart from revelation, and thus he charged Clark with holding that God is knowable apart from revelation. But I find no evidence that warrants such an interpretation of Clark. Van Til's argument here is ingenious, but it is a misunderstanding of Clark's position.

9. Clark affirmed the difference in mode, as well as the "quantitative difference" between God's knowledge and ours (see 7 above). Van Til, however, replied "that if one does not know anything of God's mode of knowing then one can know nothing of God's being"

9. What God does reveal to us, He reveals in a creaturely form. Revelation does not come to us in the form in which it exists in God's mind. Scripture, for example, is in human, not divine, language. It is "accommodated," that is, adapted in some measure to our ability to understand, though it is not exhaustively understandable to us even in that accommodated form.<sup>10</sup>

10. God's thoughts, when taken together, constitute a perfect wisdom; they are not chaotic but agree with one another. His decrees constitute a wise plan. God's thoughts are coherent; divine thinking agrees with divine logic. That is not always true of our thoughts, and we have no reason to suppose that even as we deal with revelation we may not run into truth that our logic cannot systematize, that it cannot relate coherently with other truth. Therefore we may find in revelation what Van Til calls "apparent contradictions."<sup>11</sup>

11. Discontinuity 7 is affected by the progress of revelation: the more God reveals, the more facts we know, though we never reach the point where we know as many facts as God. The other discontinuities, however, are not at all affected by revelation. No matter how much of himself God reveals, there always remains an "essential disproportion between the infinite fullness of the being and knowledge of God and the capacity and intelligence of the finite creature."<sup>12</sup> Thus even what God has revealed is in important senses beyond our comprehension (cf. Judg. 13:18; Neh. 9:5; Pss. 139:6; 147:5; Isa. 9:6; 55:8f.). According to these passages, there is not merely a realm of the unknown beyond our competence, but what is within our competence, what we know, leads us to worship in awe. The hymn of wonder in Romans 11:33-36 expresses amazement not at what is unrevealed but precisely at what is revealed, at what has been described in great detail by the apostle. The more we know, the more our sense of wonder ought to increase, because increased knowledge brings us into greater contact with the incomprehensibility of God.<sup>13</sup> It was this "essential dis-

(*ibid.*, 170). This, too, seems to reflect a misunderstanding of Clark, who according to Van Til's own account said that the mode is different, not that the mode is unknowable.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, 165.

11. I will say more on these later, when we take up the subject of logic. My pamphlet *Van Til the Theologian* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Pilgrim Publishing, 1976) attempts to give an analysis of this subject.

12. For this formulation and others in this section I am indebted to my colleague Norman Shepherd's lectures on the Doctrine of God. For the uses made of this indebtedness, I take full responsibility.

13. There are (at least) two passages in Scripture that seem to suggest that the difference between divine and human knowledge is temporary, a difference to be remedied by further revelation. In Matthew 11:25-27 Jesus says that it is the prerogative of the Son to reveal the

proportion” between Creator and creature that sometimes in the OPC controversy was described as a “qualitative difference” between divine and human knowledge, as distinguished from the “quantitative difference” described above in 7.

12. And doubtless, there is much more; we cannot exhaustively describe the differences between God’s mind and ours—if we could, we would be divine. Thus we must add an “et cetera” to the eleven differences that we have already enumerated. This “et cetera” seems to have been another part of what was meant in the OPC controversy by the phrase “qualitative difference.” At one point in that controversy, the Clark party challenged the Van Til party to “state clearly” what the qualitative difference was between God’s thoughts and man’s. The Van Til group replied that to accept that challenge would be to retract their whole position; if we could “state clearly” this qualitative difference, the difference would no longer exist. Again, I think, there was some mutual misunderstanding. At one level, it is possible (and necessary) to state clearly the nature of the difference. The difference is the difference between Creator and creature in the world of thought; it is a difference between divine thinking and human thinking, between the thoughts of the ultimate Lord and the thoughts of His servants. The implications of this basic difference can also be spelled out to some extent, as I have sought to do above. Insofar as they were asking for that kind of information, the demand of the Clark group was legitimate. But we must remember that the concept of incomprehensibility is self-referential, that is, if God is incomprehensible, then even His incomprehensibility is incomprehensible. We can no more give an exhaustive explanation of God’s incomprehensibility than we can give of God’s eternity, infinity, righteousness, or love.

(ii) *Continuities*. Scripture teaches the following continuities (the ways that divine and human thought are alike) between God’s thought and ours. Failure to consider this side of the truth will lead us into skepticism.

knowledge that He has in distinction from all creatures, and in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (cf. 2:6-17) Paul says that in the consummation we will know “even as” God has known us. Here we should note that there certainly is one sense in which revelation diminishes the distance between our knowledge and God’s (see 7 above) and that Scripture often speaks in broad, general terms, without making distinctions that may be found elsewhere on its pages. Note Hodge’s comment on 1 Corinthians 13:12: “As we are required to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect, Matt. 5:48, so we may be said to know even as we are known. We may be perfect in our narrow sphere, as God is perfect in His; and yet the distance between Him and us remains infinite. What Paul wishes to impress upon the Corinthians is that the gifts in which they so much prided themselves were small matters compared to what is in reserve for the people of God.”



If knowledge of any sort is to be possible, there must be some sense(s) in which man's thought can "agree" with God's, in which we can think God's thoughts after Him.

1. Divine and human thought are bound to the same standard of truth. As Van Til puts it, "The Reformed faith teaches that the reference point for any proposition is the same for God and for man."<sup>14</sup> I prefer the term "standard" to the more ambiguous "reference point." God's thoughts are self-validating; man's are validated by God's. Thus they are both validated by reference to the same standard, divine thought. Man's thoughts are true insofar as they conform to God's norms for human thinking. "For human thinking," of course, reminds us of those discontinuities we discussed earlier. And it must also be emphasized that our thought is subject to the norm, not identical with it, as is God's. Yet both divine and human thinking must accord with norms, and in both cases those norms are divine.

2. Divine and human thought may be about the same things, or as philosophers say, they may have the same "objects." When a man thinks about a particular rose and when God thinks about it (He is always thinking about it, of course, since He is always—eternally—omniscient), they are thinking about the same thing. Sometimes those objects are "propositions," assertions of fact. Van Til says, "That two times two are [sic] four is a well known fact. God knows it. Man knows it."<sup>15</sup> Paul believed Christ was risen; God believes the same thing. Now of course we must keep our discontinuities in mind. God's belief in the Resurrection is the belief of the Creator, the Lord. It is not the same as Paul's belief, therefore, in every respect. But it has the same *object*; it affirms the same truth. To deny this is to render impossible any talk of "agreement" between God and man. If God and man cannot think about the same things, how can they agree about them? Furthermore, denying this leads to manifest absurdity. For example, if I believe in the Resurrection, then God must not believe in it.<sup>16</sup>

3. It is possible for man's beliefs, as well as God's, to be true. A true belief is a belief that will not mislead. God's beliefs do not mislead Him, and

14. *Introduction*, 171; cf. 165.

15. *Ibid.*, 172.

16. The reader may well ask why I am belaboring such an obvious point. The reason is that some disciples of Van Til have been so zealous for divine incomprehensibility that they have gone far beyond Van Til himself, overstating their point to dangerous and preposterous lengths. Jim Halsey, for example, in his article "A Preliminary Critique of 'Van Til: the Theologian,'" *WTJ* 39 (1976): 129 takes issue with my statement that God and man can have the same beliefs and think about the same things. Does he really mean to imply that God disbelieves in the Resurrection? It is hard for me to believe that any Reformed writer could hold such a nonsensical position. Either I have misunderstood him or he has expressed himself most unclearly. More on Halsey at a later point.

true human beliefs do not mislead human beings. But there is a difference: a belief adequate to direct or lead a human life will not be adequate for God. God's life, however, is sufficiently like its image, human life, so that both God's beliefs and man's may be meaningfully described as true. A proposition that is true for humans plays a role in human life similar to the roles that propositions that are true for God play in His life. If there is no truth, or if man's truth is "wholly different," wholly disanalogous, from God's, then knowledge is impossible.

4. Just as God is omniscient, so man's knowledge in a certain sense is universal. Van Til says, "Man knows something about everything."<sup>17</sup> Because we know God, we know that everything in the universe is created, subject to His authority, and filled with His presence. Because all things are known to God, He can reveal knowledge to us about anything. Therefore all things are potentially knowable, though nothing can be known by us precisely as God knows it.

5. God knows all things by knowing himself, that is, He knows what He knows by knowing His own nature and plan. As we said earlier (discontinuity 6, above), God does not need to have anything "revealed" from outside of himself. Our thinking, as we noted, is very different in this respect, yet in a certain sense it is also similar. We, too, gain our knowledge by knowing ourselves—by knowing our own sensations, thoughts, actions, and so forth. Everything "from outside" must enter our minds if we are to know it. In a sense, then, all knowledge is self-knowledge. Unlike God's, our knowledge does not originate from within, though its inward character bears a significant resemblance to the inwardness of God's knowledge.

6. God's knowledge is self-validating, self-attesting, as we have seen (discontinuity 4, above); ours is not. Because we are God's image, however, there is some reflection in us of God's self-attestation. Because everything we know must enter our consciousness (see 5, above), even the norms by which we think must be adopted by us if we are to use them. We think on the basis of norms that we have chosen but that does not make us autonomous. The norms originate in God and proclaim His ultimate authority (not ours), and we are obligated to *choose* the ones that are truly authoritative. Thus the norms that we obey on any occasion will be the ones that we have chosen.

7. God's thoughts are ultimate creators. They cause the truths that they contemplate, but ours do not (discontinuity 2, above). Nevertheless, our thoughts are also creative in a sense. We are secondary creators. On the

17. *Introduction*, 164; cf. 166.

one hand, when we refuse to think according to God's norms, we are at the same time refusing to live in His world and devising a world of our own to replace it. On the other hand, when we think obediently, we are recreating for ourselves what God has created for us. As Romans 1 teaches, fallen man exchanges the truth for a lie. Adopting a lie affects not only the contents of our heads but every area of our lives. Fallen man lives as if this were not God's world; he lives as if the world were his own ultimate creation. And having abandoned the criteria furnished by revelation, the only criteria by which he can distinguish truth and falsehood, he has no way of correcting his mistake. On the basis of his false criteria, his false world seems to be the real world, the only world that there is. Thus in an important sense, the sinner is a "secondary creator," one who chooses to live in a world—a dream world—that he has invented. The believer, too, is a secondary creator, one who adopts God's world as his own (see 6, above).

Why speak of "creation" here? Why not merely say that men "interpret" the data of creation in different ways? Certainly it is true that this activity can be characterized as "interpretation." But if we leave the matter there, we may falsely suggest that believer and unbeliever are merely organizing or analyzing data that in themselves are neutral, that their analyses or interpretations can be compared with data that in themselves are uninterpreted and capable of being understood either way. That supposition, however, is false. The facts of creation are not raw data or brute facts that are subject to mutually contrary interpretations. They are preinterpreted by God. As Van Til says, "God's interpretation logically precedes . . . all facts."<sup>18</sup> Therefore human interpretation is never merely the interpretation of facts; it is always also a reinterpretation of God's interpretation. To deny God's interpretation is not merely to adopt an alternative but equally valid interpretation; it is to reject the facts as they truly are; it is to reject reality. There is no such thing as "brute fact" by which fallen man can seek to validate his interpretation over against God's. Fallen man can only reject the facts and seek to live in a world of his own making. Similarly, the believer, in working out a faithful interpretation of the facts, is not merely "interpreting" data but is affirming creation as it really is; he is accepting creation as the world that God made, and he is accepting the responsibility to live in that world as it really is. Thomas Kuhn, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), argues that when there are no "brute facts" to adjudicate rival understandings, the activity of interpretation is much like that

18. Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences* (unpublished syllabus), 51.

of creation. Although I reject Kuhn's relativism (as a nontheist, he assumes that we have no criterion beyond our systems to regulate facts), the concept of "re-creation" that is implicit in his view does not seem too strong.

Talk about "secondary creation" and "secondary self-attestation" (see 6, above) might be frightening to those who do not have a Reformed understanding of what the Bible teaches. To make human beings creators or attesters in any sense might seem to detract from the ultimate causality and authority of God. We must not forget, however, that not only is the Lord authoritative and in control but He is also covenantally present. Because He perfectly controls our interpretative work, all of our thinking is a revelation of Him and a manifestation of His presence. Thus we do not need to fear that the work of the human mind necessarily competes with the authority of God, because the Lord reveals himself in and through our thinking. Human freedom, then, need not block out God's revelation. Thus we need not fear thinking and knowing. And so a Reformed, or Calvinistic—not an Arminian—understanding of what the Bible teaches champions the true freedom of human thought. If true, the Arminian's boast that he is able to think autonomously ("freely") would imply only that human thought is in bondage to the random forces of chance, when in reality (according to a Reformed understanding of the Bible) that is not the case. When we think in obedience to God's Word, we know that our very thinking processes will reveal God to us. Our minds image God, even in His sovereign attributes of control and authority.

(iii) *Problem areas.* But there are some problem areas. We have seen that God's thoughts are unlike ours in certain respects and like ours in others. I have, however, purposely avoided the use of certain language commonly used in discussing these issues. Those familiar with these discussions will wonder why I have not commented, for example, on the questions of whether we can know "God in himself." Well, my position is that this and other expressions are ambiguous and therefore certain assertions containing them ought to be affirmed in one or more senses and denied in others.

Let us now examine some of these problem areas.

1. Do we have an "adequate" idea of God? Van Til<sup>19</sup> and Bavinck<sup>20</sup> say No, but that notion seems irrational. Surely, we want to say, though God

19. *Introduction*, 183.

20. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1951), 33.

is incomprehensible, at least we have an “adequate” knowledge of Him, a knowledge that is sufficient for our needs. Well, the problem is a simple case of ambiguity. In classical theology, *adequatio* meant something much more than *adequate* generally means to us, something more like *comprehension*. Van Til and Bavinck are thinking more of the classical *adequatio* than of the contemporary use of *adequate*.

2. Do we know the “essence” of God? It has been common in theology to deny that we do. Thus Bavinck says, “Calvin deemed it vain speculation to attempt ‘an examination of God’s essence.’ It is sufficient for us ‘to become acquainted with His character and to know what is conformable to His nature.’”<sup>21</sup> Van Til, however, says that we know something about everything, including the essence of God, though we cannot comprehend it. Thus Van Til teaches that with regard to knowledge of God’s “essence,” we are basically in the same position that we are in with regard to all of our other knowledge of God. There is no special problem in knowing God’s “essence.” Now we must be careful here. In such situations of theological perplexity, we are often tempted to respond to the sounds of words, rather than to their meanings. To some it sounds rationalistic to claim knowledge of God’s essence; to others it sounds irrationalistic to deny it. But a theologian must learn to analyze first and to react later. Actually the idea of “essence” is not entirely clear.

Essence, in general, is the quality or qualities by which something is defined, the quality or qualities that make something what it is. In theology we define justification as the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. Many things are true about justification, but it seems that those two phrases somehow specify what justification “really” is, what its essence is. What is the difference between a defining quality (an “essential” quality) and a nonessential quality? That is a difficult question to answer, but (ignoring some of the problems) let me suggest four criteria for an “essential quality.” (a) An essential quality is one that is in some sense real, not merely apparent—perhaps even what is “most real” about something. We seem to feel that when we get to the “essence” of anything, we are getting to what it “really” is. (b) An essential quality is one that is necessary to the being of the thing, so that the thing could not be what it is without that attribute. A triangle, for instance, cannot be a triangle without being three-sided. Three-sidedness is “necessary” to triangularity. “Having an area of three square feet” is not necessary in this sense. (c) An essential attribute is distinctive to the type of thing being defined.

21. *Ibid.*, 25.

Triangles are three-sided, but no nontriangles are three-sided. (d) An essential quality must be important to our understanding of the thing defined; one might even argue that it should be the most basic quality for our understanding. Three-sidedness, we generally feel, is the “most basic” fact for our understanding of triangularity.

In the light of that discussion, do we know the “essence” of God? We certainly know a number of divine attributes, or qualities. God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, and so forth. Certainly these attributes are real (see (a), above). Although there are differences between God’s thoughts and ours, we dare not make those differences so great that they rob us of the reality of God. When we say that God is eternal, we are talking about how He really and truly is, not merely about how He appears to us. We are talking about Him in a human way but in a way that is true; God has certainly given us the power to speak truly about Him. Furthermore, at least some divine attributes, such as eternity, are necessary (see (b), above). God would not be God if He were not eternal. Eternality is also distinctive of God (see (c), above), for in an important sense God alone is eternal.<sup>22</sup> And surely, eternity is also important to our understanding of God (see (d), above), though it is dangerous to make judgments about what attribute or attributes of God are “most” important.<sup>23</sup>

With respect to the most natural meaning of *essence*, then, Van Til is correct. We can know God’s “essence” as much as we can know anything else about God (within the limitations we noted earlier); there is no reason to draw any limitations about “essence” that we have not already drawn about other knowledge of God. Perhaps the polemic against seeking to know God’s “essence” is more broadly intended to discourage speculation (assertions not warranted by Scripture), specifically about the nature of God. Certainly, people do often speculate when they seek to answer questions about God’s nature and attributes. And often the quest for God’s “essence” becomes an attempt to weigh the importance of various attrib-

22. In another sense, we can have a life that Scripture calls “eternal,” but that is different from the eternity that is distinctive of the Creator.

23. In one sense, all necessary attributes of God are equally important because they are all “coterminous with” one another; they represent the whole being of God as seen from different perspectives. In another sense, it is difficult to determine what is most important “for our understanding” of God. Subjective considerations that raise questions about the whole idea of “essence” certainly enter in here. Perhaps what is “essential” has as much to do with our subjective need as it has to do with “objective reality.” Yet as we have seen, essence (see (a), above) is often thought to be, among all possible predications of a subject, a paradigm of objectivity.