

VAN TIL AND THE *SENSUS DIVINITATIS*

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What I propose to do in this chapter is to emphasize the central place that the *sensus divinitatis* holds in a Covenantal, Reformed apologetic. I recognize that for some, this topic is well-established, maybe even too well-worn, and non-controversial. However, as I hope to show, a proper understanding of this biblical truth and its central place in Van Til's apologetic is still, for whatever reason, in need of clarification and emphasis.

More importantly, I want to highlight the *sensus divinitatis* and its application to a Covenantal apologetic in order to put front and center the crucial truth that Van Til's apologetic is, first and foremost, *built on the truth of Scripture*, as that truth is expressed most faithfully in Reformed theology. Van Til's apologetic is not, first and foremost, a philosophy; neither is it, first and foremost, a tool for cultural analysis, although, as we will no doubt see in this book, so much of what he says offers keen insight into philosophy, cultural analysis, and other disciplines. However, it is abundantly clear that what Van Til saw himself doing as he thought deeply and broadly about the discipline of apologetics, was applying the best insights of

Reformed theology in order to defend the Christian faith with an apologetic consistent with its doctrine.

First, what exactly *is* the *sensus divinitatis*? Though the terminology has its roots in Calvin, we will recognize that Calvin did not invent the idea. Calvin, like Melancthon, determined to order the topics of his *Institutes* according to the order of topics given in the Epistle to the Romans.¹ The term itself, therefore, has its proper roots in Scripture, in the first place, specifically in the book of Romans, and not in its use or reference in church history.

So, what does Holy Scripture say about this *sensus divinitatis*? Briefly, the teaching of Scripture in Romans 1:18 and following concerning the *sensus divinitatis* can be summarized in three interrelated propositions:

1. All people know the true God truly and will be judged, at last, on the basis of that knowledge (1:18–20).
2. Knowing the true God truly includes the fact that all people know God’s “righteous requirements” (cf. 1:32; 2:14–16).
3. Because of the radical effects of sin all people, apart from Christ, suppress the knowledge of God and of his requirements (1:21–32; 2:14–16).

These three truths and their implications could occupy us for some time. There are deep and abiding biblical, theological, cultural, and philosophical applications embedded in each of them. For now, we will have to restrict ourselves to just a few of them.

First, we could ask, how can those who are totally deprived possess a *true* knowledge of God? Surely, if our cognitive faculties inevitably function according to the utter sinfulness of our own hearts, they wouldn’t be able to produce a true knowledge of God, would they? No, they wouldn’t. And this is one reason why the *sensus*

1 See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129.

divinitatis has been defined in terms not of the activity of our cognitive faculties *per se*, but in terms of *God's activity* in and through our hearts, as image-bearers of God.

We know God truly, in other words, not by way of a cognitive process of inference or positive demonstration; we know him because, as Scripture says, *he* makes himself known to us all (v. 19). Our understanding of God and his requirements is, in that sense, intuitive. That is to say, God is implanting or inserting into his human creatures the knowledge of who he is and of what he requires of us in such a way that we cannot but know him and know how we're meant to respond to him (compare Rom. 1:32 and 2:14–16).

The true knowledge of the true God that is universally given to us by God is a knowledge that is as basic to us as our own self-consciousness. We are not self-conscious because we have inferred or demonstrated such a thing to ourselves. We are self-conscious *because* we are human beings, made in God's image. So also for the knowledge of God given in and through all of creation. It is a basic, human intuition of our utter dependence on God, and our responsibility to acknowledge him for who he is.

It is this truth of the universal, immediate, non-inferential, intuitive, true knowledge of the true God that marked the beginning of Calvin's *Institutes*, given, as we said, his commitment to set his topics according to those expressed in the Epistle to the Romans. It is this truth that, in my opinion, has still not been given the Reformed emphasis it deserves, especially in discussions of apologetics, of whatever variety. And here we can refer to the prescient remarks of B. B. Warfield on Calvin and the *Institutes*:

But we can attribute to nothing but his theological genius the feat by which he set a compressed apologetical treatise in the forefront of his little book... Thus he not only for the first time supplied the constructive basis for the Reformation movement, but even for the *first time in the history of Christian theology* drew in outline *the plan of a complete structure of Christian Apologetics*. For this is the significance in

the history of thought of Calvin's exposition of the sources and guarantee of the knowledge of God, [*sensus divinitatis*] which forms the opening topic of his Institutes.²

Though Warfield himself did not accept the challenge to develop “a complete structure of Christian Apologetics,” (and, as we will see Old Princeton missed Calvin's genius in their own apologetic) he saw clearly what the future of apologetics could be, given Calvin's theological emphases.

Now, to Calvin's theological genius. As Calvin comments on Romans 1, he notes,

There is within the human mind, *and indeed by natural instinct*, an awareness of divinity (*divinitatis sensum*). This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, *God himself has implanted* in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.³

There are a couple of notes worth taking here. First, Calvin recognizes the *sensus divinitatis* to be according to “natural instinct” (*naturali instinctu*). This, I think, helps us highlight the non-inferential mode of our implanted knowledge of God. Note as well that Calvin rightly recognizes that this implanted knowledge of God is obtained according to a *dynamic process* of revelation in and through creation—“ever renewing its memory, God repeatedly sheds fresh drops” of his revelation to us. This dynamic affirms that the knowledge of God in us is given by God to us in our living and moving in his world. It is not some static once-for-all moment in our lives, but is embedded in life in God's world as God's image.

2 Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 30, my emphases.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 43–44, my emphases.

A bit later, Calvin says,

Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a *sense of divinity* which can never be effaced is *engraved upon men's minds*. Indeed the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is *naturally inborn in all*, and is *fixed deep within*, as it were in the very marrow.

And then, he concludes:

From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is *master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget*, although many strive with every nerve to this end.⁴

So, says Calvin, As a consequence, *men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him*.

This knowledge of God that all people possess is so embedded in us, so clear to us, and so manifest that it can only be had because of what *God* does in and through us, and through creation, and not because we are able to think clearly and cogently about God and his world.

Clearly, and rightly according to Scripture, Calvin sees that the sense of divinity that all people possess is, in fact, a *universal knowledge* of God that provides the foundation both for our responses to that knowledge as we live in God's world, and for our inexcusable status before God at the judgment. This is why Warfield saw in "Calvin's genius" "the plan of a complete structure of Christian apologetics." A universal suppression of the universal knowledge of God will provide universal principles for a defense of Christianity. In God's providence, it was left to the genius of Van Til to employ the genius of Calvin just for that purpose.

4 Calvin, *Institutes*, 46, my emphases.

We do not have the space in this chapter to look at every instance in which Van Til refers to and applies the *sensus divinitatis* to his apologetic, so even a brief selection can be helpful. After quoting Calvin, Van Til says this,

Thus the knowledge of God is inherent in man. It is there by virtue of his creation in the image of God....God has never left himself without a witness to men. He witnessed to them through every fact of the universe from the beginning of time. No rational creature can escape this witness. It is the witness of the triune God whose face is before men everywhere and all the time. Even the lost in the hereafter cannot escape the revelation of God. God made man a rational-moral creature. He will always be that. As such he is confronted with God. He is addressed by God. He exists in the relationship of covenant interaction. He is a covenant being.⁵

It is important to note here that it is the *sensus divinitatis*, at least in part, that defines *all people*, not just Christians, as “covenant beings,” to use Van Til’s term. All people exist, as Van Til puts it, “in a relationship of covenant interaction.”

This is a crucial apologetic point. At no time when we speak to those apart from Christ, or when we defend the Christian faith, do we speak to someone to whom God has not and is not already speaking. We speak the truth to those who already know the truth. So, says, Van Til,

If then the believer presents to the unbeliever the Bible and its system of truth as God speaking to men, he may rest assured that there is a response in the heart of every man to whom he thus speaks. This response may be, and often is, unfavorable. Men will reject the claims of God but, none

5 Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 174–175.

the less, they will own them as legitimate. That is, they will in their hearts, when they cannot suppress them, own these claims. There are no atheists, least of all in the hereafter.⁶

While this may be obvious to many of you by now, the problem with so much of the discussion surrounding apologetics, even in a Reformed context, has been the lack of recognition of this basic, biblical, and Reformed truth.

We should recognize in this regard that Thomas Aquinas, that great champion of what is called “classical apologetics,” was keenly aware of the possibility of understanding Romans 1 in this way, but rejected it. John of Damascus, to whom Aquinas refers, put it this way:

God, however, did not leave us in absolute ignorance. For the knowledge of God’s existence has been implanted by Him in all by nature. This creation, too, and its maintenance, and its government, proclaim the majesty of the Divine nature... For, as we said, the knowledge of the existence of God is implanted in us by nature. But...the wickedness of the Evil One has prevailed so mightily against man’s nature as even to drive some into denying the existence of God, that most foolish and woefulest pit of destruction...⁷

It is this very passage that Thomas cites *in disagreement*. In his reference to John of Damascus, Thomas says:

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. Now those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can

6 Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 175.

7 John Damascene, “An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” in *St. Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 9b, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899), 1, 3.

see in regard to first principles. But as Damascene says (*De Fid. Orth.* i. 1, 3), *the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all*. Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.⁸

As Thomas rejects the notion of God's existence being self-evident, he is clearly aware of the teaching of John of Damascus. He could have seen its cogency had he looked more carefully at Romans 1:18–32, and John 1:1–9. Instead, his response to the Damascene is this:

Reply Obj. 1. To know that God exists in a *general and confused way* is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him. *This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists;* just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for many there are who imagine that man's perfect good which is happiness, consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.⁹

This response shows Thomas's neglect of a close, exegetical look at passages which are crucial for understanding how we know God, which was of primary concern for him. It also shows, as we noted above, Thomas's weak view of sin and its devastating effects in us.

In his argument against the self-evident knowledge of God, Thomas makes a distinction between that which is self-evident *in itself* and that which is self-evident *to us*. He affirms the former and denies the latter:

Therefore I say that this proposition, "God exists," *of itself* is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject; because God is His own existence as will be hereafter shown

8 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province., Complete English ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), I q.2 a.1 obj. 1.

9 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I q.2 a.1 ad 1.

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(Q. III., A. 4). Now because we do not know the essence of God, *the proposition is not self-evident to us*; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature—namely, by effects.¹⁰

We don't need to rehearse the history of these kinds of discussions, but simply to recognize that the *motivation* for Thomas's insistence that the proposition "God exists" is in need of demonstration in order to be known is due primarily to his rejection of any notion of a *sensus divinitatis*, or an implanted knowledge of God.

It was this rejection of the implanted knowledge of God that motivated Thomas to provide proofs, or demonstrations, of God's existence. In other words, God had to be *proven by demonstration* if he were to be known by natural reason. We should note here that, during the time of the Reformation, particularly due to "Calvin's genius," there was a substantial change. According to Richard Muller:

The form and the function of the proofs of God's existence in the Reformed orthodox systems, thus, also provide evidence against the claim that this theology is a form of rationalism. On the one hand, these proofs do not function as the necessary and proper foundation of the doctrine of God. *They do not typically serve, as they did in Aquinas' Summa, as a demonstration of the ability of reason to point toward the same conclusion as is given by revelation*, and therefore of the ability of reason to venture into theological discussion. Their primary purpose is to attack skepticism and atheism on the *basis of a fundamental, but non-saving natural knowledge, including the innate knowledge of God* or immediate *sensus divinitatis* shared by all people.¹¹

10 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I q.2 a.1 resp., my emphasis.

11 Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy; Volume 3: The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 192, my emphasis.

Note here that in the Reformation period there is a substantial difference of the “form and function” of the proofs of God’s existence, given the *sensus divinitatis*. Those proofs are no longer *foundational*, as they were for medieval theology. Instead, they can be used within the *biblical foundation* of a “non-saving natural knowledge, including the innate knowledge of God or immediate *sensus divinitatis*.”

What Muller concludes here is, I would submit to you, *exactly* what Van Til was arguing. In keeping with Scripture, with Calvin’s genius, and with the Reformation, once we see the knowledge of God as universally present in all people, any proofs for God’s existence must, by necessity, presuppose that knowledge, and not pretend to offer it anew by way of demonstration.

This, I would also argue, is what makes any Reformed attempt at a “classical apologetic” so biblically discordant and theologically incongruous. For example, in their attempt to set forth a classical approach to apologetics, Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley compromise on some basic, Reformed principles. First, in their argument for reason as a basic *principium* of knowledge (my word, not theirs), the authors conclude “We suggest that classic Reformed orthodoxy saw the noetic influence of sin *not as direct through a totally depraved mind, but as indirect* through the totally depraved heart.”¹² In other words, the ability of every human being properly to reason about God and his revelation is due to the fact that sin does not *directly* affect our minds; it is the heart that, if you will, does all the dirty work, not reason, at least not directly. It would be interesting to see if there are any other Reformed theologians who argue for “indirect total depravity of the mind.” Even if so, such a view seems contrary to Scripture.

Perhaps it is the weak view of sin that informs their view of Romans 1 and its implications for human beings. In their summary of Romans 1, they say,

12 R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 243.

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In Romans 1:20, Paul is affirming that humans can in fact move from the phenomenal realm to the noumenal realm... *The method of knowing is mediate*, or inferential, indicating the rational power to deduce the necessary existence of the invisible from the perception of the visible.¹³

This view, as we have seen, is directly in line with Aquinas's view, which is acknowledged by these authors. Importantly, however, this view is in direct conflict with Calvin's genius, and more importantly, with Scripture. The point of Romans 1 is not at all to teach us what human beings *can do* in and with God's revelation in creation. The point is to affirm that all of us, universally, are without excuse *just because* of what God does in and through His creation, i.e., making himself clearly known to us. There is not the slightest hint of our ability to infer or demonstrate God's existence by way of his effects. As a matter of fact, as we have seen, Romans 1 affirms that, once we get our dirty, sinful hands on what God has revealed and implanted in us, we inevitably and inexorably seek to hold down the truth revealed.¹⁴

It is this fundamental misconstrual of the radical effects of sin, and of the universal *sensus divinitatis* as taught in Scripture, that motivates this disagreement with Van Til. So, in their refutation of Van Til, the authors say:

But people do not necessarily consider themselves in opposition to God, *whose existence they do not even know at the outset*. They do not necessarily deny the divine being as Van Til insists they do. People do not assert their autonomy *against an initially known God* as Van Til insists they do. They simply operate *according to human nature*.¹⁵

13 Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 44, my emphasis.

14 For a more current misconstruing of apologetics within a Reformed context, see J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

15 Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 233, my emphasis.

This, unfortunately, moves these three Reformed theologians, not entirely but in this particular area, decidedly into an Arminian or Roman Catholic view of man and of sin. There is no initial knowledge of God. There is no assertion of autonomy against the God who is truly known. There is, simply, some kind of neutral notion of a “human nature.”

This, perhaps among all else, demonstrates the central importance of Warfield’s statement. It is Calvin’s genius in his recognition of the *sensus divinitatis* that sets the agenda for a Reformed approach to Christian apologetics. Without a proper understanding of Romans 1, without a robust recognition of the *sensus divinitatis*, there cannot be a truly Reformed apologetic; there will inevitably be theological compromise along the way. With such a recognition, however, all that we think and do apologetically will have its epistemological foundation in God’s revelation, including that universal and true knowledge of the true God.

One of the more surprising and in some ways encouraging applications of the importance of the *sensus divinitatis* has come to us from the epistemology of Alvin Plantinga. This is surprising in that it was employed by arguably one of the brightest and most influential philosophers of the past few decades. In the development of Plantinga’s “proper function” epistemology, he offered the *sensus divinitatis* as a proper and useful category for the *de jure* warrant of theistic belief. It would be difficult to overstate how radical this is from the perspective of philosophy, even philosophy of religion. One suspects that only someone with Plantinga’s credibility and reputation could get away with such an unexpected and foreign intrusion into otherwise fairly predictable philosophical arguments.

Plantinga’s employment of the *sensus divinitatis* for his epistemology project is also encouraging in that it could have the effect of intimating that a philosophical epistemology is in need of *theology* as a foundation and guide. This is not Plantinga’s point, but it is a clear implication of his overall project, especially with respect to the *de jure* warrant of *Christian* belief.

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In my recent interaction with four other views of religious epistemology, one of the interlocutors who set forth what he called a perspectival epistemology, argued that my Covenantal approach was unconvincing, in part, because he was unable to see how the *sensus divinitatis* was in any way foundational for, as he put it, “epistemology *per se*.”¹⁶ This is a curious statement at best. It demonstrates a typical resistance of philosophers to what they tend to see as an encroachment of theology on philosophy.

Surely, if it is the case that we can affirm, not simply a universal clear and distinct *idea*, as in Descartes, or even a common-sense *belief*, as in so much of epistemology, but if we can affirm a universal *knowledge* that itself requires a trustworthy knowledge of *creation*, then we have, in effect, found what epistemology has laboriously and unsuccessfully sought for millennia! If I could put this in somewhat strong terms, how could it be that an infallible, transcendent, universal affirmation, as we have in Scripture, of infallible, transcendent, and universal knowledge of the true God by virtue of knowledge of creation be in any way irrelevant, and not foundational to, “epistemology *per se*”? In a very important sense, Plantinga has thrown the door open for theologians and Christian philosophers to further enhance and develop the implications of the *sensus divinitatis*, not just for *religious* epistemology, but for the entire epistemological project.

There are, however, a couple of important caveats to Plantinga’s introduction and use of the *sensus divinitatis* as an epistemological category. First, Plantinga sees the *sensus divinitatis* more as a *category* than as actual *content*. In his discussion of Calvin’s view, he says,

...it sounds as if Calvin thinks knowledge of God is *innate*, such that one has it from birth, “from his mother’s womb.” Still, perhaps Calvin doesn’t really mean to endorse either of

16 John M. DePoe and Tyler Dalton McNabb, *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: An Introduction to Five Views on the Knowledge of God* (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2020), 180.

these suggestions. The *capacity* for such knowledge is indeed innate, like the capacity for arithmetical knowledge. Still, it doesn't follow that we know elementary arithmetic from our mother's womb; it takes a little maturity. My guess is Calvin thinks the same with respect to this knowledge of God; what one has from one's mother's womb is not this knowledge of God, but a *capacity* for it.¹⁷

This, I think, is a substantial flaw in Plantinga's application of the *sensus* for his epistemological project. It is understandable in that his emphasis on "proper function" will inevitably emphasize a more "mechanical" aspect of our cognitive faculties. Thus, for Plantinga, the *sensus* is an "input-output device" that might produce theistic belief, given a certain set of circumstances and stimuli.¹⁸

But the *sensus* cannot be viewed as a mere capacity. For Paul, it is, in fact *the knowledge of God*. That is, its source is God and His revelation and its *terminus* is our own hearts. From the outside, as it were, it is God's revelation. But once it finds its proper home, it is the actual and true knowledge of God, given by God, implanted in our very souls. Van Til puts it this way:

Romanism and Evangelicalism, however, do not attribute this assumption of autonomy or ultimacy on the part of man as due to sin. They hold that man should quite properly think of himself and of his relation to objects in time in this way. Hence they do injustice to Paul's teaching with respect to the effect of sin on the interpretative activity of man. As they virtually deny that originally man not merely had a capacity for the truth *but was in actual possession of the truth*, so also they virtually deny that the natural man suppresses the truth.¹⁹

17 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 144.

18 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 146.

19 Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 115, my emphasis.

And then later he affirms, “All men know God, the true God, the only God. They have not merely a capacity for knowing him but actually do know him.”²⁰ While it is certainly the case that one who knows God must have the capacity to know him, it is clearly not the case that a capacity to know entails knowledge. The concern of Scripture is not that men will be judged according to their *capacity* to know God, but according to the actual knowledge of God that was given by God, and on the basis of which we are judged, since we are all required to honor God and to give him thanks (Rom. 1:21).

The second caveat to Plantinga’s notion of the *sensus* is tied to what is virtually a universal affirmation in analytic theology, that is, that belief *always* precedes and is entailed by knowledge. There is, in the literature of epistemology, an assumed “gap” between belief and knowledge, and much discussion in epistemology is focused on how we might fill that gap such that belief is, in some way, transformed into knowledge.

Plantinga is convinced of this distinction and so his epistemological project is focused and concerned, not so much with *truth*, but with warranted *beliefs*. At the end of his book on warranted Christian belief, Plantinga asks this with respect to his subject,

But is it true? This is the really important question. And here we pass beyond the competence of philosophy, whose main competence, in this area, is to clear away certain objections, impedances, and obstacles to Christian belief. Speaking for myself and of course not in the name of philosophy, I can say only that it does, indeed, seem to me to be true, and to be the maximally important truth.²¹

It is because of this bifurcation that Plantinga’s notion of the *sensus* is directly tied, not to knowledge, but to *belief* in God. What the *sensus* is designed to do, according to Plantinga, is to “output”

20 Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 177.

21 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 404.

theistic belief when and if the relevant circumstances and experiences obtain.

This view, however, seriously undermines the clear meaning of Paul's discussion in Romans. As we have already seen, Paul has no interest in delineating what people created in the image of God might *believe* about God. Instead, he is concerned to argue that there is a universal *knowledge* of God made effectual by the replete revelation and implanting activity of God himself. In other words, all people *begin* with knowledge of God which comes to us all in and through all he has made.

As an aside, this biblical truth strikes me as both a radical critique and as a tremendous opportunity for Christians interested in epistemology. Instead of surveying all of the various beliefs and their various sources and structures as a first step in epistemology, why not begin with the fact that we are, in the first place, people who know God through what he has made, such that whatever else we believe and think and do, presupposes that most basic knowledge of God and our, either sinful or redeemed, reaction to that knowledge? In that way, we *begin* with human knowledge and move from there to various beliefs and their content and sources.

There is one more important aspect to Van Til's consistent application of the *sensus divinitatis* to his apologetic that must be mentioned here. It is at this point that Van Til's apologetic, and the biblical notion of the *sensus divinitatis* contained in his apologetic, are properly critical of any notion of common sense realism, especially as that realism was adopted by Old Princeton. Though there are others of Old Princeton that we could emphasize, it will be sufficient here to highlight Van Til's own professor of apologetics at Princeton, William Brenton Greene, Jr. Van Til is clear in his writings that he has the utmost respect and admiration for Greene. He also recognizes that the appointment of John Kuizenga to succeed Greene at Princeton was a definitive movement away from Reformed orthodoxy. However, Van Til detects problems:

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Deciding, therefore, to follow the Reformers in theology, it was natural that I attempt also to do so in apologetics. I turned to such Reformed apologists as Warfield, Greene, and others. What did I find? I found the theologians of the “self-attesting Christ,” defending their faith with a method which denied precisely that point!²²

This faulty method which Van Til detected as a student at Princeton, and which Greene incorporates in his apologetic can be illustrated in Greene’s “Junior Year” apologetics syllabus.²³ There Greene defines apologetics as “That branch of theological science setting forth to *human reason* the *proofs* that Christianity is the supernatural and exclusive religion,” (emphasis original, 3).

This in itself might not be too troublesome; it depends on what Greene means by “human reason” and by “proof,” both of which he highlights for emphasis. Fortunately, he tells us what he means:

The Reason = sum of man’s rational, moral, and spiritual natures. Sometimes means “power of reasoning,” understanding; sometimes intuition. — [McCosh’s *Cognitive and Motive Powers.*], (6).

It becomes clear, especially given Greene’s reference here to McCosh, that his view of reason is that which was set forth by Common Sense Realism, and taught at Princeton by James McCosh and others.

Among the principles of Common Sense Realism, which Greene mentions in his syllabus, is that reason is assumed to be trustworthy because it includes intuitive self-knowledge, which “is self-evident, necessary and universally accepted,” (6). What this means for Greene

22 Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and the Defense of Christianity and My Credo*. (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ: 1980), 82.

23 The following quotations are from William B. Greene Jr., *Outline Syllabus on Apologetics of Lectures* (Seminary Book Room: Barr and Stone, 1898–99). Page numbers refer to that syllabus.

is that “we must have a rational basis for the acceptance of supernatural revelation” which itself must be proved by way of reason because “reason is nearer and stronger to us than any external authority,” (8). Not only so, but, according to Greene, “outside the sphere of religion, reason is supreme” (8).

Greene supposes, therefore, that the way to defend Christianity is by way of reason alone, as it is able, self-evidently, necessarily, universally, and intuitively to understand who we are as human beings. When the topic is religion, says Greene, reason’s role is “to prove rational truths as a basis of revelation” and “to determine evidence of revelation” (8).

By now, we should see that this application of Common Sense Realism seems unaware of the radical Reformed view of the *sensus divinitatis*. For Calvin, and contrary to Greene, there is something much “nearer and stronger to us” than our reasoning ability. It is the God-consciousness that comes to us in tandem with our own self-consciousness. The minute we open our eyes, says Calvin, we are compelled to see God. And that vision of God comes with all the self-attesting authority of God’s own revelation, because that’s what initiates it. Greene and his colleagues at Old Princeton were too greatly influenced by Witherspoon, McCosh, and others to see this clearly.

In a penetrating assessment of the effects of Common Sense Realism on Old Princeton, George Marsden’s article, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,”²⁴ shows, among other things, the (partial) historical progression in which scholarship has divorced itself from Christianity, beginning in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. One of the key elements in this regression was the adoption, in evangelical apologetics, and the consequent failure of, Reid’s Common Sense philosophy. And the primary contribution

24 George Marsden, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

to the failure of Reid's Common Sense philosophy was its failure to acknowledge, critique, and revise its own presuppositions.

As Marsden follows the historical progression of evangelical academia, and evangelical apologetics in particular, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, he notes the inability of evangelical apologetics, during that time, to deal with the destructive elements of Darwinism. Marsden's central question, given such an inability, is this: "What...about this mid-nineteenth-century American evangelical apologetic made it particularly vulnerable to onslaughts of the scientific revolution associated with Darwinism?"²⁵

Now the "mid-nineteenth-century American evangelical apologetic" of which Marsden speaks is, he says, promoted by Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and B. B. Warfield, among others. And, says Marsden, "Common-Sense philosophy was the starting point..."²⁶

Beginning one's apologetic with the Common-Sense philosophy meant beginning with the "immediate, non-inferential beliefs...as Reid proposed, such as the existence of the self, the existence of other personal and rational beings, the existence of the material world, the relationship of cause and effect, the continuity of past and present..."²⁷ In defending Christianity, therefore, Princeton apologists began by showing how Christianity could fit within the already established truths of common sense. In other words, belief in God can fit with other, common sense, beliefs.²⁸ This did not bode well for their response to Darwinism.

Furthermore, as Marsden points out, all that Hodge (for example) could do was assert that large parts of the population still believed in an intelligent Designer, but the next generation would show such a belief to be far from universal.

So, the fatal blow to Reidianism, argues Marsden, was demonstrated in the apologetical responses to the introduction of Darwinism;

25 Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," 247.

26 Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," 235.

27 Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," 235.

28 This is one reason why Plantinga calls his epistemology a Reidian approach.

and the fatal blow can be summarized in this way: “Common sense could not settle a dispute over what was a matter of common sense.”²⁹

That is, to put it in other words, common sense beliefs were not weighty or substantial enough to carry the load of foundational presuppositions. It became clear that something else, something more universal, more concrete, more immediate, more intuitive and undeniable was needed for any notion of what is *common* among us to be justified. And, as you might expect, it is only the universal, concrete, immediate, and undeniable *sensus divinitatis* that can alone fulfill that role.

This is why in any acknowledgement of those things that are common between believer and unbeliever, such commonality cannot stand on its own, and cannot be seen to be our *principium cognoscendi*. Common notions cannot be a common foundation.

With respect to any idea of “common notions,” Van Til again follows Paul and Calvin:

All men have common notions about God; all men naturally have knowledge of God. In this sense there is, as Calvin points out on the basis of Paul’s letter to the Romans, a natural knowledge of God and with it *of truth and morality*.³⁰

We can see here that Van Til includes a deep-seated commonality that is entailed in the *sensus divinitatis*. It is *that* commonality alone that is able, as a foundation, to support all that flows from it, even such things that might appear, on the surface, to be common. As Van Til notes,

It is this *actual possession of the knowledge of God* that is the indispensable presupposition of man’s ethical opposition to God. There could be no *absolute ethical antithesis* [author’s emphasis] to God on the part of Satan and fallen man unless they are self-consciously setting *their own common notions*,

29 Marsden, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” 247.

30 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 190, my emphasis

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derived from the folly of sin, against the *common notions that are concreated* with them.³¹

There are, then, two categories of “common notions.” There are “common notions” derived from our depravity, and “common notions” that are given with the *sensus divinitatis*, and the latter are the preconditions for the former!

In this way, we see that any notion of “natural light” or “natural law” must be seen to be a subset of or reference to the *sensus divinitatis* within all people. And, in this way, we can see that by virtue of the *sensus divinitatis* and our sinful responses to it, we need to recognize two modes of “commonality” between believer and unbeliever. Those two modes will express themselves dialectically and antinomically in all unbelieving thought. This is why Van Til characterizes unbelieving thought as trapped in a rational/irrational dialectic.

Contrary to criticisms of Van Til that continue the narrative that he denies any common ground between believer and unbeliever, therefore, it is quite explicitly the opposite. Not only does he affirm that there are common notions, he provides two categories of such common notions, given both the *sensus divinitatis* and the perpetual suppression of the truth that follows from our sinful condition.

CONCLUSION

It might be an overstatement, but not by much, to see in Paul’s address at the Areopagus all of the essential aspects of Van Til’s employment of the *sensus divinitatis*. Specifically, we see this when Paul quotes from the Greek poets. For example, when Paul uses the quote, likely, from Epimenides, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), we can see both the *sensus* and the suppression of the truth on display. Why, we could ask, would Epimenides even make an attempt at such an all-encompassing and unifying proposition?

31 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 190, my emphasis.

He would do so because of the *sensus divinitatis*. He knows, as do his readers, that there is, in fact, the true God who brings together every life, every movement, and all existence by virtue of His divine character and power. He knows the One who unifies the entirety of creation. That's the *sensus*.

But, in an explicit movement toward the irrational, Epimenides attributes such character and power, not to the true God whom he knows, but to Zeus, a false god who himself had a father and was limited by the power of Fate. This, we can plainly see, makes the statement of Epimenides patently false, and it displays the irrationality of the suppression of the truth in unrighteousness. Thus there is a rational/irrational, what I have called a *sensus/suppression*, dialectic at the root of unbelieving thought. And, we should note, it is this rational/irrational or *sensus/suppression* dynamic that characterizes all current discussions on sexuality and gender, a subject which is deserving of a book of its own. Paul makes that clear, as well, in Romans 1.

There is another important and yet-to-be-fully-explored aspect of the *sensus divinitatis* and its suppression that Paul exhibits at the Aereopagus, and that aspect is *persuasion*. Paul uses quotes well-known to his audience at Athens, in part, in order to show them how they have misconstrued, misunderstood, and misapplied their own beliefs, and thus created a false religion. He, as it were, uses their own words to reach into their very hearts and to show them that there can be only one true and living God, in whom we all live and move and have our being. Their false beliefs become the conduit that Paul uses to express the truth of Scripture.

This approach is in keeping with Van Til's argument and, we should note, is in direct continuity with the approach of the Reformed. We have already noted the fact that the Reformed restructured Aquinas's proofs in order to take full account of the *sensus divinitatis*. They also restructured them in order to take full account of the *persuasive* character of the arguments. Speaking of apologetic arguments, Richard Muller notes:

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The historical context of argumentation is crucial for an understanding of the development of proofs for the existence of God in Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries....In relation to these issues, even the Thomistic “five ways” take on a character not at all familiar to their famous author: *they are now rhetorically, not demonstratively, framed, and they are presented together with and as having the same status as the standard rhetorical arguments...* Such presentation...from one perspective...admit[s] the existence of God is *indemonstrable*. From another perspective, however, it steps past the critique by declaring God *principal* and therefore *undeniable*, using the *rhetorical form* of the arguments to press home the point.³²

So much of Van Til’s thesis is contained in this one quote that it is impossible adequately to unpack it here. Notice that the Reformed saw the notion of the existence of God as “indemonstrable.” By that is *not* meant that they resorted to some kind of fideism. Instead, they recognized that “demonstration,” on the Thomistic scheme, presupposed a neutral notion of reason that gave little credence to the noetic effects of sin. Notice also that, even as “indemonstrable,” the Reformed saw the argument as “principal and therefore undeniable.” Could this be anything but Van Til’s insistence on a “transcendental” approach to arguments for God’s existence? Doesn’t the notion of “undeniable” equate with the “impossibility of the contrary”?

Not only so, but the use of the “rhetorical form” of arguments, we will recognize, highlights the notion of *persuasion* as the proper mode and structure of argumentation. That persuasion, as the Reformed recognized early on, has its proper foundation in the *sensus divinitatis*, which Calvin so ingeniously recognized, and which Van Til so ingeniously applied to the development and application of a Reformed apologetic.

32 Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy; Volume 3: The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 193, my emphasis.

There is so much more that needs to be said about the *sensus divinitatis*. But let me conclude with this challenge to Van Til's critics: Enough about Van Til the renegade; enough about the fallacy of circular reasoning, about fideism, about Van Til's "extreme" views of human knowledge. If you want to challenge Van Til's approach, you need to provide an alternate exegesis of Romans 1. Show me what Paul says there, and show me, if you can, how Calvin got it wrong, and how the Reformed were wrong to press the "undeniable," even if "indemonstrable," and rhetorical aspects of our universal knowledge of God. Enough with the ambiguous and convoluted objections to Van Til. It's past time, I would suggest, to incinerate the tired and weak army of straw men enlisted as objections to Van Til. It's time to return to Van Til's use of and dependence on Scripture and the Reformed theology that comes from it.

The *sensus divinitatis*—Scripture affirms it, Aquinas rejected it, Calvin explained it, the Reformed restructured Thomas's proofs according to it, Warfield foresaw its radical use for apologetics, even as Old Princeton replaced it with a notion of common sense. Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, so faithful in other areas, misconstrued and then denied it. Van Til, following Calvin, Bavinck, and others, took it up and, as Warfield saw, made it central to a Reformed defense of the Christian faith.

What do you do in your apologetic approach with Scripture's affirmation of a universal *sensus divinitatis*? Van Til has answered that question, and he has answered it in a way that is fully consistent with the theology of the Reformation. Given all of this, the pressing, final question is this: What other answers, biblically and theologically, can be given, concerning the *sensus divinitatis* and its application to apologetics, especially by those who hold to Reformed theology? I remain certain that there is no other apologetic option available for one whose theology takes its cue from the genius of Calvin and the Reformation, as Van Til did.