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"The republication of this volume is most welcome. Fully consistent with the apostolic demand to bring every thought captive in obedience to Christ as that is to be done under the final authority of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture, the robust and penetrating theological epistemology this book provides is needed as much today as when it first appeared. Oliphint's copious annotations throughout enhance its usefulness."

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"Every time I revisit his writings—which is often—I find my conviction reinforced that Cornelius Van Til is the most important and incisive Reformed thinker of the last hundred years. I'm therefore delighted that Westminster Seminary Press is reissuing *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*. The book makes for a challenging read, but it is replete with profound and illuminating insights, and Dr. Oliphint's superb foreword and explanatory notes make it much more accessible to readers unfamiliar with Van Til's thought and the theological principles that undergird his philosophical analyses."

> —James N. Anderson, Carl W. McMurray Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary

"Cornelius Van Til's writings continue to prove themselves helpful and incisive as the decades move forward. If anything, they grow in importance as the antithesis between Christ and the world becomes more evident in the twenty-first century. I commend this new edition of his work."

> —Vern S. Poythress, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Biblical Interpretation, and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

"I don't agree with everything Van Til argued, but I never fail to be edified by his overall concern. The overwhelming *emphasis* has to be the attitude of Christian apologetics: We are not God. God has revealed himself, but we systematically 'suppress the truth in unrighteousness.' The way things are (ontology) precedes how we know them (epistemology). The humility of covenant servants before the covenant Lord must be preeminent in our thinking about how dependent creatures encounter an independent Creator. This emphasis, at the heart of Van Til's *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, is a bracing challenge at a time when we think we are in the driver's seat."

> —Michael S. Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

"Cornelius Van Til has been called the most original apologist of the 20th century (Pierre Courthial). . .[yet] the premise of this book, as with everything he wrote, is simple but profound: God is self-defining and sovereign over all things,

including 'epistemology' or knowledge. Yet this does not make him the author of sin. We have here a felicitous mystery. The fruit of this conviction enlivens all the pages of this book. Within this central principle, they are surprisingly diverse. By reading them, if not already the case, the reader will become convinced of the centrality of such knowledge for all of life. The pioneering foreword by K. Scott Oliphint is worth the price of the volume. We are grateful to Westminster Seminary Press for providing this updated edition."

> —William Edgar, Professor Emeritus of Apologetics, Westminster
> Theological Seminary

"This edition of *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* continues Scott Oliphint's highly useful work of annotating Cornelius Van Til's most influential volumes on Christian apologetics and theology. In the form of 350 footnotes added to this work, Oliphint's glosses make Van Til's inferences more readily accessible to contemporary readers, repeatedly relate the point under discussion to other points Van Til makes in his larger body of work, translate every one of Van Til's Latin and German quotations into English, and add substantive biographical synopses of the scores of thinkers discussed by Van Til (especially patristic sources and modern theologians). Along the way, Oliphint fully documents Van Til's consilience with the Reformed systematic theologian Herman Bavinck, and his foreword explains how Van Til's dialectic makes use of principles of plenitude, continuity, and discontinuity. This is an impressive re-presentation of Van Til for the next generation."

> —Greg Welty, Professor of Philosophy, Southeastern Baptist Theological
> Seminary

"This splendid annotated edition will make key elements of Van Tilian thought accessible to a new generation of scholars. Readers already familiar with Van Til's approach, and those new to the work of this most remarkable of theologians, will alike find much in these pages to help revivify, reinforce, and indeed rethink the apologetic enterprise in the twenty-first century."

> —Christopher Watkin, Associate Professor in French Studies, Monash
> University

"Cornelius Van Til's work represents an influential stream of reception of the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition in North America, and is often misunderstood by both critics and enthusiasts alike. His *Christian Theory of Knowledge* clearly presents his vision for a Reformed apologetic, along with his contested critiques of other major thinkers that have come before him. Westminster Seminary Press is to be thanked for making this representative work newly available again for a fresh reading."

> —Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology,
> Reformed Theological Seminary

A CHRISTIAN THEORY *of* KNOWLEDGE

A CHRISTIAN THEORY *of* KNOWLEDGE

CORNELIUS VAN TIL

EDITED *by* K. SCOTT OLIPHINT

WSP WESTMINSTER SEMINARY PRESS

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FOREWORD

In the first chapter of this book, Cornelius Van Til notes that:

> It is of critical importance in the current scene that a consistently Reformed apologetic be set forth. The non-Christian point of view is much more self-consciously hostile to Christianity than it has ever been. The fact that the assumption of human autonomy is the root and fountain of all forms of non-Christian thought is more apparent than it has ever been in the past. Any argument for the truth of Christianity that is inconsistent with itself should not expect to have a hearing. Only a position which boldly and humbly challenges the wisdom of the world and, with the Apostle Paul, brings out that it has been made foolishness with God will serve the purpose. Only such a method which asks man to serve and worship the Creator rather than the creature honors God and assigns to him the place that he truly occupies. Only such a method is consistent with the idea that the Holy Spirit must convict and convince the sinner. The Holy Spirit cannot be asked to honor a method that does not honor God as God.[1]

Van Til's concern, throughout his career, was for a "consistently Reformed apologetic." That apologetic, as has too rarely been emphasized, especially in literature critical of Van Til, has its *animus* in the biblical theology that came forth from the Reformation. As Van Til notes, the Reformers and theologians of the post-Reformation era were not *centrally* concerned with a biblically consistent defense of Christianity. But they did lay the groundwork for such a defense. It was in this context that Van Til set himself to the application of Reformed theology to Christian apologetics, the challenge that motivated his entire career.

But Van Til's work was no mere historical enterprise. His words, written

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1. See page 12–13 in this volume.

more than fifty years ago, are more relevant today than they were when they were first penned. Authority of all kinds was challenged in the decade of the sixties and "freedom" was set forth as *summum bonum*. But he could not have seen how twenty-first century notions of "freedom" and of autonomy, as well as a militancy against authority, would make the sixties pale by comparison.

For the malcontents of the sixties, it was primarily familial, institutional, and governmental authority that was being challenged by the younger generation. In our current day, the entire history of humanity, as well as the most basic and intuitive laws of nature, are regarded as nothing but outdated, superficial and rigid prejudices—fetid as rotten fish—that must be discarded in the waste bin so that we all, together, can celebrate our now-enlightened enfranchisement. Autonomy, on vivid display in the sixties, is now the putrid air to which everyone is constantly exposed, threatening to suffocate any trace of opposition to it. The chaos that the sixties initiated has descended the ladder of irrationalism as hostility to Christianity continues to grow at an almost blinding pace.

The good news in the midst of this chaos is that the "wisdom of the world" looks more and more like utter foolishness. Cultural authorities, who claim to "follow the science," are adept at ignoring and suppressing any science that will not fit their own cultural model. Thus, "science" itself loses all objectivity, and a purportedly objective notion like "follow the science" becomes the opposite of itself; its translation, in practice, is "follow *me*." Autonomy reigns and chaos results. Objectivity becomes subjectivity; the rational becomes irrational.

In the midst of our present cultural crises, Van Til's analysis in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* is even more relevant than when he wrote it. Some of the names, ideas, and philosophical systems are no longer the cultural touchpoints they were in Van Til's day. Many of them have already been consigned to their proper dustbins (which is a fitting reminder about our present context). However, the *critiques* that he offers to those names, ideas, and philosophical systems endure and remain useful for mounting a Christian defense in today's world. These critiques remain so because they rest on the unchanging Word of God, and on the Reformed theology that flows from that Word.

PLENITUDE, CONTINUITY, AND DISCONTINUITY

As I read through this book one more time, with "fresh eyes" in order to annotate it, it struck me that it might be useful to explain in a bit more detail the dialectic that Van Til utilizes—in this book more than any of his other works—as he both critiques unbelieving ideas, and as he presents, defends, and explains Christian truth in light of those ideas.

There is a triplex of inextricably related principles that Van Til deploys in various ways throughout this book that can benefit from a little explanatory background. They are (1) the principle of *plenitude*, (2) the principle of *continuity*, and (3) the principle of *discontinuity*. Though all three principles are rarely found in contemporary literature, the latter two especially should be recovered as useful, at least structurally if not specifically, in a Christian apologetic.

It is my opinion that Van Til, in his use of these three principles, was influenced, at least in his language, by Arthur O. Lovejoy's highly influential book (during Van Til's career), *The Great Chain of Being*.[2] Much of Lovejoy's influence on Van Til is not seen explicitly in Van Til's published work. It is, however, a significant part of Van Til's unpublished syllabus, "Christianity in Conflict,"[3] a course he taught at Westminster Theological Seminary for decades. His use of the three principles listed above in that syllabus will be helpful in understanding his use of them in this book.

The Principle of Plentitude

First, what does Van Til mean by the "principle of plenitude" and why is it useful for his apologetic purposes? Quoting Lovejoy, Van Til says, "This principle shows that, after all, 'a God unsupplemented by nature in all its diversity would not be "good,"' and, therefore 'would not be divine.'"[4]

Anyone who has followed Van Til's career will know why this "principle of plenitude" was of such interest to him. As he set out, from the point of his doctoral dissertation onward, to critique philosophical idealism in its various forms, one of his primary critiques was that the "Absolute" of idealism was, in the end, *not* absolute at all. Even as some were wanting to adopt idealism as a Christian philosophy, Van Til argued instead that the "Absolute" of idealism could only be what it was if it had, over against itself, a "relative" by which it is defined and according to which it *must be* related. This, structurally, is what the "principle of plenitude" holds as well.

The "principle of plenitude," according to Lovejoy, *requires* that "the Good," as the ultimate reality, *must* express itself. If it did not express itself, how could it be good at all? Here is Lovejoy (quoted by Van Til),

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2. For a useful assessment of Lovejoy's significance, see Daniel J. Wilson, "Lovejoy's the Great Chain of Being After Fifty Years" in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, No. 2, (1987): 187–206. Wilson notes Jaakko Hintikka's assessment that Lovejoy's book has been "the most influential single work on the history of ideas in the United States during the last half century" (p. 202).

3. Cornelius Van Til, "Christianity in Conflict" in *The Pamphlets, Tracts, and Offprints of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. Eric H. Sigward. Labels Army Company: New York, 1997. LOGOS Bible Software.

4. Ibid.

. . .the concept of Self-Sufficing Perfection, by a bold logical inversion, was—without losing any of its original implications—converted into the concept of a Self-Transcending Fecundity. A timeless and incorporeal One became the logical ground as well as the dynamic source of the existence of a temporal and material and extremely multiple and variegated universe. The proposition that—as it was phrased in the Middle Ages—*omne bonum est diffusivum sui*[5] here makes its appearance as an axiom of metaphysics.[6]

The "principle of plenitude," in other words, defines ultimate goodness as including a *necessity* of diffusion and expression. Goodness would not be ultimately good unless it actualized everything of itself that could possibly be actualized. How could "the Good" be ultimately good if there were possible existents that the Good *would not* actualize? This principle moves, according to Lovejoy, from Plato, through to Aristotle, into much of the Christian tradition.

With this. . . there was introduced into European philosophy and theology the combination of ideas that for centuries was to give rise to *many of the most characteristic internal conflicts*. . . the conception. . . of a divine completion which was yet not complete in itself, since it could not be itself without the existence of beings other than itself and inherently incomplete; *of an Immutability which required, and expressed itself in, Change; of an Absolute which was nevertheless not truly absolute because it was related*, at least by way of implication and causation, to entities whose nature was not its nature and whose existence and perpetual passage were antithetic to its immutable subsistence.[7]

In this quotation we see again why Lovejoy's analysis of the "great chain of being" so resonated with Van Til. Van Til himself was tireless in his efforts to show "many of the most characteristic internal conflicts" of unbelieving thought. He would display those internal conflicts brilliantly throughout this book.

He also continually brought out the inconsistency of Arminian and Roman Catholic thought, for example, as thought that imagines a God who is *not* in the end "most absolute," but who is, instead, necessarily dependent on his creation to be who he is and to do what he does. For Van Til, Lovejoy's analysis of the "principle of plenitude" was further confirmation of a compromise—both

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5. That is, "all good is self-diffusive."
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., my emphases.

of philosophy and of some systems of theology—that displayed the "internal conflicts" present in their respective systems of thought.

It is this "internal conflict" that Van Til (as well as Lovejoy, though in a vastly different way) applied to various systems of thought, and which is delineated by the other two key, dialectical, and related principles—the "principle of continuity" and the "principle of discontinuity."

The Principle of Continuity

The "principle of continuity" follows from the "principle of plenitude." Lovejoy argues that the "principle of plenitude" *inevitably* results in the "great chain of being," which displays the "principle of continuity." The "great chain of being," says Van Til (quoting Lovejoy) is,

> composed of an immense, or—by the strict but seldom rigorously applied logic of the *principle of continuity*—of an infinite number of links ranking in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through 'every possible' grade up to the *ens perfectissimum*—or, in a somewhat more orthodox version, to the highest possible kind of creature, between which the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite—every one of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the 'least possible' degree of difference.[8]

Here, then, is the "principle of continuity." It is a principle, entailed and motivated by the "principle of plenitude," which recognizes "Being" to be of a transcendental nature—that is, it necessarily actualizes and applies to all that exists. It also distinguishes between existent things according to their respective *modes* and *degrees* of existence. There is a "chain of *being*" because "Absolute *being*" must express itself by a diffusion of *existence*; and there is a "*chain* of being" because the expression or diffusion of "Absolute being" can only emanate downward, as it were, to actualize other existent things. The "lowest" expression of being is perilously close to non-being; the highest is closest to the Absolute. Whether low or high, however, there is, throughout *all* that exists, a *chain*, and that chain is exhaustively linked by "Being" or existence itself.

The "principle of continuity," as Lovejoy described it, and as Van Til affirmed, is, in and of itself, a principle of *necessity* or of *determinism*. Lovejoy

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8. Ibid. This "scale of being" idea has been replete in theology as well. For a discussion of the great scale of being applied to "Perfect Being Theism," see Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism*, (Oxford University Press, 2017).

argued that, while Plato introduced the "principle of plenitude," it was Aristotle who showed that the "principle of continuity" is directly deducible from it.

> From the Platonic principle of plenitude the principle of continuity could be directly deduced. . . If there is between two given natural species a theoretically possible intermediate type, that type must be realized—and so on *ad indefinitum*; otherwise, there would be gaps in the universe, the creation would not be as 'full' as it might be, and this would imply the inadmissible consequence that its Source or Author was not 'good,' in the sense which that adjective has in the *Timaeus*.[9]

In Van Tilian terms, the principle of continuity, since it flows from the necessity entailed by the "principle of plenitude," is a principle of *determinism*. The "great chain of being" is a chain that *must* be what it is, without gaps and without remainder.[10] It is, necessarily and from first to last, a *plenitude*—all that *could* exist, *must* exist. Thus, when Van Til employs the notion of a non-Christian "principle of continuity," he means by that some non-Christian notion of *necessity*, or of *determinism*, or, more generally, of *rationality* or *unity*. It is this principle, as employed by the non-Christian, that is supposed to make sense of, or properly and meaningfully interpret, the facts around us.

The Principle of Discontinuity
Van Til recognized that, as Lovejoy argued, it isn't possible to live with such a stark view of necessity or determinism. The "internal conflict" which Lovejoy mentioned, and which Van Til himself had seen in unbelieving thought from the beginning of his career, is manifested when the notion of "pure contingency" is introduced or affirmed to counteract or complement such determinism. With the introduction of "pure contingency," we have the third key principle, the "principle of discontinuity." So, according to Van Til,

> . . .if men draw back in horror from the logical consequences of their allegiance to the determinist principle [of continuity] of Parmenides then they have no way of escape except by somehow adding the principle of abstract contingency [discontinuity] to their principle of abstract determinism [continuity].[11]

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9. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), 71.
10. Ibid., 246, Lovejoy notes that "*natura non facit saltus,*" nature does not produce gaps.
11. Van Til, "Christianity in Conflict."

It is this dialectic, according to Van Til, of the "principle of continuity" together with the "principle of discontinuity" that characterizes all non-Christian thought, as well as less-than-Reformed systems of theology. Lovejoy sees it preeminently in medieval theology. Van Til puts it this way:

> There was in the thinking of these medieval philosophers, Lovejoy boldly argued, first the *principle of continuity* which, he said, must be traced back to Parmenides. By using this principle the medieval thinkers indeed got unity into everything, even into all the changing things of this world. But the unity they found in this change is the unity of *rational determinism*. And the employment of this principle of unity would naturally lead to the reduction of all individuality and change to abstract identity. But then, added Lovejoy, in order to escape this determinism they employed a *principle of discontinuity* which is purely *irrational*. Using this principle would naturally lead to a God who is unknown and unknowable, even to himself as well as to a man wholly unknown and unknowable to himself. Using this principle of discontinuity consistently would mean the destruction of all unity.[12]

That is, in sum, and as Van Til illustrates in the pages of this book, unbelieving thought sought for a principle of unity, and some thought they had found it in the principle of continuity. But, as the changing facts of the world were referred to this principle, only "abstract identity" could be affirmed. When affirmed, the facts of this world lost all individuality. Thus, discontinuity had to be affirmed as well. But a principle of discontinuity destroyed, by definition, all unity. This is the inescapable and irresolvable dilemma of dialectical thought.

This elucidation of the principles of continuity and discontinuity, in my view, is one of the definitive marks of Van Til's genius in his Reformed apologetic approach. While there will be certain *emphases* on the rational or the irrational in unbelieving thought, Van Til consistently argued that all unbelieving thought rests on a rational/irrational dialectic, is self-contradictory, and thus, *on its own terms*, is self-destructive. It is self-destructive because such a dialectic cannot, in fact, provide the metaphysical or explanatory foundation that is needed for the system of thought to be coherent. Instead, any and all non-Christian systems of thought—and any Christian theology that smuggles in non-Christian assumptions—will inevitably vacillate between two incommensurate principles. To put it in concrete terms, non-Christian systems will, at one and the same time, argue that the traffic light is dialectically both green and red at the same time. No such

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12. Ibid., my emphases.

light could exist, much less do the work it is meant to do. Such is the case with theologically inconsistent systems as well.

So, in reading this book, it will be helpful if, when Van Til employs the notion of a non-Christian "principle of continuity," one can see in that principle the non-Christian "principle of plenitude," which itself reduces reality to a necessary, rationalistic determinism. When Van Til employs the notion of a non-Christian "principle of discontinuity," one can see in that principle the affirmation of "pure contingency," which refers to a process of pure chance, which, by definition, can have no rational foundation. The former principle is equivalent to a non-Christian notion of rationality; the latter is equivalent to a non-Christian notion of irrationality. With this dialectic in play, meaning, at root, is sacrificed at the altar of autonomy. That, in itself, is a useful commentary on our present age.

THE CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE

As Van Til offers his critique, showing the incoherent dialectic of non-Christian thought, as well as "sub-Christian" or non-Reformed theologies, he also offers a Christian alternative. With respect to the "principle of plenitude," Van Til recognizes that Christianity must reject it wholesale.

> The first thing to be said by the Christian believer today is: (1) That taking full account of the significance of the principle of plenitude, he rejects it *in toto*. This principle of plenitude is the product and expression of apostate faith. It is the natural man, blind to the truth about God, about himself, and about the world, who employs this principle as his weapon against the truth as it is in Jesus. Thus faith stands against faith. True faith stands over against false faith. Faith which thinks and speaks of everything on the presupposition of the truth of the Christian framework of things revealed by Christ in his Word stands over against the faith which thinks and speaks of everything on the presupposition of the falsity of that framework. But for man to presuppose the falsity of the Christian framework of things requires that he assumes the truthfulness of its opposite. And the truthfulness of the framework opposite to that of Christianity rests upon the assumption of human autonomy.[13]

Because the "principle of plenitude" *necessarily requires* the relative and contingent with respect to the highest "Being," or with respect to God, Christians

13. Ibid.

must reject it. In no sense can the Infinite *necessarily require* the finite, the Immutable *necessarily require* the mutable, the One God *necessarily require* the diversity of creation. The Christian God's relation to creation originates in the free determination of his will; creation could in no wise be necessary. Not only so, but God's relation to creation could in no way change his character. He is, as he *must* be and remain, eternally, infinitely, and immutably the "I Am Who I Am." The "principle of plenitude" must be rejected by Christians, as Van Til says, *in toto*.

Christian Continuity and Christian Discontinuity

However, with respect to the other two principles—of continuity and discontinuity—Van Til, in this volume more than any other of his published works, co-opts the same language and argues for a *Christian* understanding of each of these two principles. He offers to his readers a *Christian* "principle of continuity" and a *Christian* "principle of discontinuity."[14] Van Til's analysis of the history of Christian thought depends on his assessment of both the non-Christian and the Christian principles of continuity and discontinuity, so we need to provide a "working knowledge" of the *Christian* principles in order properly to assess his arguments herein. With respect to a Christian "principle of continuity," Van Til says, "This involves the idea that God himself is wholly known to himself and that the created universe is also wholly known to him because wholly controlled by him. This is the Christian principle of continuity."[15]

To put it in Christian vernacular, the Christian "principle of continuity" refers to the aseity and the consequent all-controlling sovereignty and providence of God. What makes it a principle of *continuity* is the fact that there are no "gaps" in God's character, because of his exhaustive and *a se* knowledge of himself and of everything that is.[16] Thus, "continuity" is defined, not in terms of a "principle

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14. Whether or not this co-opting of philosophical language is the best way to combat unbelieving thought can be debated. What is certain is that Van Til uses this language as a point of *persuasion*. That is, instead of defaulting immediately to the language of Reformed theology, he is wanting to communicate to those who are not familiar with Christian language. He is saying to his non-Christian opponents that if it is a "principle of continuity" they want, or a "principle of discontinuity," such principles can only be found and have meaning *within* the Reformed faith; he defines these very principles with Reformed content. Outside of that faith, they inevitably reduce to incoherence. For a stimulating discussion of Van Til's use of philosophical language, see Hendrik G. Stoker, "Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Professor Dr. Cornelius Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan, (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 52–53.

15. See page 48 in this volume.

16. This is in contrast to Molinism and Arminianism wherein aspects of God's knowledge are *conditioned* according to what human beings would choose in any given situation. This makes God dependent on man, and it denies the self-sufficiency of God's character and knowledge.

of plenitude" which *requires* that all that is possible be actual and that disallows for gaps of "Being" in all that exists. Instead, "continuity" is defined in terms of God's own *a se* character, and the implications of that character with respect to all that he determines to create.[17]

Importantly, and perceptively, Van Til defines the Christian "principle of discontinuity" in the context, initially, of a Reformed doctrine of Scripture:

> Moreover, to say that every fact in the world is what it is because of its place in the system of truth set forth in Scripture, is to establish the legitimacy of the *Christian principle of discontinuity.* The system of truth set forth in Scripture cannot be fully understood by the creature. The point here is not merely that creatures who are sinners are unwilling to believe the truth. The point is further that man as finite cannot understand God his Maker in an exhaustive manner. As he cannot understand God exhaustively, so he cannot understand anything related to God in an exhaustive way, for to understand it we would have to penetrate its relation to God and to penetrate that relation we would have to understand God exhaustively.[18]

This is a fascinating and ingenious application of a philosophical principle, now applied to one of the most contentious aspects of Reformed theology, the doctrine of the self-attestation and absolute authority of Scripture. Quoting Herman Bavinck, Van Til argues,

> It must be said, therefore, that there is a sense in which the orthodox believer holds to his doctrine of Scripture "in spite of appearances." He believes in the Bible as the Word of God because God has said that it is his Word. "With respect to the inspiration of Scripture as is the case with every other doctrine the question *is not in the first place how much can and may I believe without coming into conflict with science, but what is the witness of Scripture and what is accordingly the expression of Christian faith.*"[19]

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17. To the extent that Arminian and Roman Catholic theology depend on a Molinistic view of human freedom, they would not be able to affirm this Christian "principle of continuity." Nor could they affirm that God is "most absolute." The fact that God depends on pre-volitional counterfactuals of human freedom as a prerequisite to his determination to create requires that his knowledge is not altogether from or of himself. *What* he knows with respect to human beings, he only knows *because* of their free choices, and not because of his unconditional, comprehensive knowledge of all that is.

18. See page 27 in this volume.

19. See page 27 in this volume, my emphasis.

It is just *because* we cannot penetrate exhaustively into the "gapless" counsel, sovereignty, and providence of God that we must affirm a Christian "principle of discontinuity." That principle requires us to take God at his Word, and to frame the facts of the world, as best we are able, in light of what God has said in his Word. As noted above, any other view that claims, for example, to "follow the science" winds up with pure subjectivism, and thus with a dialectic of determinism ("science") and abstract contingency at its root.

But there is more to Van Til's Christian interpretation of the "principle of discontinuity" as it exhibits the deep roots of Reformed theology in Van Til's thinking. Note:

> . . .the Christian idea of God's control of all things—the Christian principle of continuity—*requires a Christian principle of indeterminism*. These two are correlative of one another, and the relationship between them cannot be penetrated by the mind of man. *This relationship is not contradictory since in God there is full internal coherence.* But for the human mind they must in the nature of the case have *the appearance of being contradictory*. The idea of their unity must therefore be given on authority. Hence the need of supernatural revelation, and, after the fall, of the inscripturation of this supernatural revelation. The biblical idea of unity presupposes the self-identification of God and of his finished revelation to men in history. It involves the idea of God's giving in this self-identified revelation a system of truth, which is *anthropomorphic in its expression* and yet *all-determinative in its content*. These two ideas, that of self-identification and of an authoritative system, are involved in one another.[20]

This is a brilliant insight from Van Til. Some elaboration should help show its grounding in Reformed theology. First, what does Van Til mean when he says that God's control of all things—which is included in Van Til's Christian use of the "principle of continuity"—*requires* a Christian principle of indeterminism? How, in other words, could there *be any* "indeterminism" if, in fact, God ordains "whatsoever comes to pass," and is in control of *all things*?

Christian Indeterminism and the Westminster Confession of Faith
We should recognize, in order to address this question, that Van Til uses the term "indeterminism" in its Christian sense, as including or entailing the Reformed notion of contingency and of free will. All of these represent, for Van Til, the

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20. See page 71 in this volume, my emphases. Van Til applies the principle of continuity/discontinuity both epistemologically and metaphysically. The principle relates to our knowledge and to the way the world is, including the relationship of God's exhaustive control over the world and the reality of our free choices. My thanks to Greg Welty for pointing this out.

Christian "principle of discontinuity." With that in mind, and to better grasp those Reformed notions, we can be helped by two places in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

First,

> God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.[21]

Included in this one section is both the Christian "principle of continuity" as well as the Christian "principle of discontinuity." With respect to the "principle of continuity," the Confession affirms that God unchangeably ordains *whatsoever comes to pass*. There is, in history, from the beginning of creation and into eternity future, *nothing* that is outside of God's ordaining providence and control. *Whatever* happens, in all of creation, happens by virtue of God's *a se* ordination of all things.

Just as the "principle of plenitude" attempts to ensure that there are no "gaps" in all that exists, so also, in rejecting such a principle, the Reformed view of all that exists is that the self-sufficient and *a se* God ordains it all. There are no "gaps" in anything in God's creation since he is utterly and exhaustively *of himself*, entirely self-sufficient, and thus he "works all things according to the counsel of his will," (Eph. 1:11, ESV).[22]

In keeping with this Christian notion of the "principle of continuity," the Confession goes on to affirm the following:

> Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.[23]

Van Til's Christianized "principle of continuity" includes God's exhaustive self-sufficiency, aseity, and knowledge. This section of the Confession staves off any notion, as in Molinism, that there are states of affairs over which God has

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21. Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 3.1

22. The Molinist might agree that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will," but they understand "the counsel of his will" to be logically consequent to his middle knowledge. Thus, the "counsel of his will" is a *conditional* counsel in that it depends on what free creatures would do. This is not, we should recognize, what Paul meant in that verse.

23. WCF 3.2

no control, and on the basis of which God determines His decree. That is, this section of the Confession affirms that God's decree and providence, which are inclusive of *everything in creation*, were in no way conditioned on some notion of God prevolitionally "foreknowing" or "foreseeing" what *would* take place, in order then to decree what *will* take place. In sum, the Confession is in direct opposition to any kind of Molinistic understanding of God's counsel and will. Thus, a Christian view of the "principle of continuity" includes God's aseity and exhaustive self-sufficiency, as well as his meticulous sovereignty and control over everything, at all times and into eternity, in and over all of creation.

However, given the succinct brilliance of the Confession, the writers anticipated objections that would arise, since they affirmed God's exhaustive control over all things. Without arguing their points (which is not the purview of a confession), they went on to state that God ordaining everything does *not*, in fact, make God the "author of sin." Neither does his exhaustive ordination of all things coerce the human will or remove the liberty and contingency of second causes. As a matter of fact, they affirmed—and here the Confession combines for us, in a way that we cannot exhaust, the principles of "continuity" and of "discontinuity"—that the freedom of the human will (more on this below), as well as the liberty and contingency of second causes, are *established* by God's ordaining of all things. This point is too often ignored or overlooked.

Free Will

It might be a surprise that the Westminster Confession of Faith dedicates a chapter (9) to addressing the topic of free will. That phrase is often found in Molinist and Arminian theologies. It is significant that the Reformed authors of the Confession wanted to include it, to define it, and to affirm it. There is much that could profitably be discussed in that chapter, but we will need to be content with a quick review of section 1:[24] "God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil."[25]

There is a mountain of theology packed into this one sentence. We first recognize that the Confession affirms that the human will retains, by virtue of what it is, a "natural liberty." This natural liberty, the Confession wants us to recognize, has not been lost because of the fall. Sections 3 and 4 of chapter 9 will go on to describe the will before the fall and after the fall. But, in each case,

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24. It is worth noting that Van Til wrote a paper in 1924, while a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, titled, "The Will in its Theological Relations." He was awarded a fellowship in systematic theology for that paper.

25. WCF 9.1

both before and after the fall, the will of each and every human being, because of the way in which God has made it, has as an aspect of its *essential* character a "natural liberty."

Section one goes on to describe what is meant by "natural liberty." It means the human will is never *forced* or *coerced* to decide what it decides, nor is it naturally *determined* to good or evil. These truths require some theological distinctions which can only be briefly broached here.

First, the Reformed have maintained that the will functions, at all times, without any *natural* necessity. This means, in part, that for every human being there is no point in our choosing in which our wills are naturally or necessarily *coerced* to make the choices we make. We should recognize, however, (and section three makes this clear) that, since the fall, there is, indeed, a *moral* necessity attached to our choices. That moral necessity does not eclipse, but rather presupposes, the lack of natural necessity of the human will.

Second, it is because we retain the ability *actually* to choose, without coercion, that our wills are not *naturally* determined to good or evil. So, whatever notion of theological determinism one might want to support, that determinism *cannot*, from a Reformed perspective, include a *natural necessity* of the human will. Along with this, two more points need to be mentioned.

In order to try to articulate what this denial of a natural necessity of the human will might look like, another important distinction was, and is, utilized by the Reformed—the distinction between the "necessity of the consequent," and the "necessity of the consequence." The former the Reformed deny, the latter they affirm. In the "necessity of the consequence" the Reformed affirm God's all-controlling decree. The "necessity of the consequence" recognizes that, whatever the outcome of any given event, including any given choices required in that event, God has ordained its outcome, and thus, in that sense, the outcome is determined by his decree and providence. The necessity of the consequence is what it is because God ordains "whatsoever comes to pass."

With the "necessity of the consequent," which the Reformed deny, the actual choice required in a given circumstance is not, in and of itself *as a choice*, *necessary*, but is, instead, *contingent*. For example, if we take the if-then proposition, "If Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah, he will obey," the "If" clause is the antecedent, and the "he will obey" clause is the consequent. The question with respect to Abraham's choice is, when he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, is there, in reality and at that moment, a *real choice* for Abraham? To put it another way, given God's all-controlling decree and providence, does Abraham *really* have a choice on Mt. Moriah? Would the Reformed change the consequent to "he *must and necessarily will* obey"? The answer is "no" with respect to the consequent itself.

Since the Reformed deny the necessity of the consequent—the "he will" clause in our example—Abraham's choice on Mt. Moriah is, itself, historically *contingent* and not necessary. Abraham retains the *natural* ability to choose either to obey or to disobey the Lord on that mountain. There is real *contingency* involved in Abraham's decision at that point. That contingency does not, because it could not, eclipse, undermine, or supersede God's ordination of every facet of that event; instead, God ordaining that event, including Abraham's choice, *establishes* the contingency involved in the choice, even as it denies any autonomy of choice. The same is true of any and every human choice; there is *real* contingency in the choosing, such that *we* are responsible for what we decide.

Included in this discussion of the contingency of our choices is a Reformed notion of *concursus*. Here, Bavinck's explanation is among the best:

> With his almighty power God makes possible every secondary cause and is present in it with his being at its beginning, progression, and end. It is he who posits it and makes it move into action (*praecursus*) and who further accompanies it in its working and leads it to its effect (*concursus*). He is "at work" [in us] "both to will and to do for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). But this energizing activity of the primary cause in the secondary causes is so divinely great that precisely by that activity he stirs *those secondary causes into an activity of their own*. "The providence of God does not cancel out but posits secondary causation." Concurrence is precisely the reason for the *self-activity of the secondary causes*, and these causes, sustained from beginning to end by God's power, work with a strength that is appropriate and natural to them. So little does the activity of God nullify the activity of the creature that the latter is all the more vigorous to the degree that the former reveals itself the more richly and fully. Hence, the primary cause and the secondary cause *remain distinct*. The former does not destroy the latter but on the contrary confers reality on it, and the second exists solely as a result of the first. Neither are the secondary causes merely instruments, organs, inanimate automata, but *they are genuine causes with a nature, vitality, spontaneity, manner of working, and law of their own*.[26]

LIMITING CONCEPTS

In tandem with the Christian "principle of continuity" is the Christian "principle of discontinuity," the latter of which includes, says Van Til, a Christian notion

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26. Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 614, my emphases.

of *indeterminism*. The reality and "establishing" (as the Confession puts it) of *contingency* is what Van Til means by a Christian notion of *indeterminism*, and is, in part, included in his notion of a Christian "principle of discontinuity."

This is all-important because of (1) the determinism that is entailed by the "principle of plenitude," and because (2) many see the affirmation of God controlling "whatsoever comes to pass" as entailing a determinism that disallows for the reality of the contingent. From the beginning, the Reformed have never argued for such a determinism. As a matter of fact, notwithstanding claims to the contrary by Arminian and Molinist theologians, the Reformed have always affirmed *both* that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass *and* that he is in no wise the author of sin. The contingency, or indeterminism, established by God's ordaining of all things is embedded in a Reformed view of secondary causes, and of the human will.

There is one more salient point that should be briefly elaborated. In his affirmation of a Christian conception of both continuity and discontinuity, Van Til says, "These two are correlative of one another, and the relationship between them cannot be penetrated by the mind of man. *This relationship is not contradictory since in God there is full internal coherence.* But for the human mind they must in the nature of the case have *the appearance of being contradictory.*"[27] Here I think Van Til's introduction of a Christian view of "limiting concepts" can be useful.[28]

We need initially to recognize what a *Christian* version of "limiting concepts" is, according to Van Til:

> If we hold to a theology of the apparently paradoxical we must also hold, by consequence, to the Christian notion of a limiting concept. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept has been developed on the basis of the non-Christian conception of mystery. By contrast we may think of the Christian notion of the limiting concept as based upon the Christian conception of mystery. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of would-be autonomous man who seeks to legislate for all reality, but bows before the irrational as that which he has not yet rationalized. The Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of the creature who seeks to set forth in systematic form something of the revelation of the Creator.[29]

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27. See page 71 in this volume, emphases mine.

28. For a fuller discussion of "limiting concepts," see my foreword in Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2016), xxxvi–xliii.

29. Van Til, Cornelius, *Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2008), 16.

The phrase "limiting concept," as used by Van Til, is a term that helps to explain a biblical concept of mystery based on the God of Scripture. Not only so, but to employ the non-Christian notion of a "limiting concept" and, thus, of mystery, destroys any basis at all for understanding human experience.

Hyperdox

Mystery, as Bavinck reminds us, is at the root of all Christian theology.[30] When we affirm the ontological Trinity, the incarnation, the covenant of God with man, etc., we are articulating the *truth* of the matter, according to Scripture, but we also affirm that our minds are not able to put the truth of the matter together in a way that is completely amenable to our usual ways of thinking. Perhaps the best word to denote a teaching that requires that we *affirm* that which cannot be *delimited* by our laws of thought is "hyperdox," i.e., a teaching of Scripture that must be affirmed, though it does not conform to, but rather transcends, standard rules of thought.[31] That is, these are teachings (*dox*) that are *above* (*hyper*) our typical (and proper) ways of thinking.

Van Til refers to these teachings as "apparent contradictions."[32] By that, he does not mean that they are explicit and obvious violations of the law of non-contradiction or some other canon of formal logic. That is, we do not affirm, for example, that God's attitude toward all men is gracious *in the same way* that God's attitude toward all men is not gracious. Similarly, to use another example, with respect to God's triunity, we do not affirm that God is three *in the same way* that he is one. Nor do we affirm that Christ is God *in the same way* that he is man. There are deep and abiding issues in these truths of *compatibility*, but incompatibilities are not, *per se*, contradictions.

Van Til's notion of "apparent contradiction" is shorthand for recognizing that what we do affirm with respect to (much of) biblical teaching is that we are not able completely to subsume such teaching under our standard laws of thought. Our laws of thinking are not able exhaustively to demarcate the meaning of what we affirm to be true in Scripture. The problem is *not*, we should note, with our standard ways of thinking. God has created us so that, typically, when we affirm something to be true we are not meant, at the same time and in the

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30. Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 29.

31. Standard rules of thought would typically include the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, and the law of excluded middle. The term "hyperdox" is from H.G. Stoker and may be preferable to the term "paradox." A paradox refers to two mutually implied teachings that are set side-by-side; a hyperdox includes those two (or more) teachings, but affirms that they are above and beyond our human ability to understand. See Stoker, "Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Professor Dr. Cornelius Van Til," 30.

32. Cornelius Van Til, "Christianity in Conflict."

same way, to deny its truth. He has created us so that we distinguish one thing from another (i.e., diversity). He has created us to see and affirm the myriad relationships of differing things (i.e., unity) that is replete through the entirety of creation and of our experiences. This is all a part of "thinking God's thoughts after him."

The issue with respect to "hyperdoxes," then, is that an understanding of the character of God and his activity in the world will always transcend the typical ways we are meant to understand and know the world. More importantly, it is the mystery of biblical teaching, the hyperdoxes given to us in Scripture, that should form the *foundation and basis* for our typical ways of thinking. That is, it is not as though we're meant to apply our laws of thinking as far as we possibly can and then, in the end, to refer the remainder to mystery. Rather, we *begin* with mystery because we *begin* with the triune God himself. In that way, at minimum, we recognize our typical ways of thinking themselves to be limited, to be in need of their own foundation, and to have their own God-given boundaries.

Another important aspect to this notion of "limiting concepts" is that, unlike dialectical thinking, which posits contradictory or incommensurable notions without the possibility of any resolution, the limiting concepts posited, because they are biblical and thus are integral to a Reformed theological system, *depend on* and *interpret* each other. Given that they have their ultimate resolution in the mind of God, it is incumbent on the Christian to see each "side" of the two as properly modifying, explaining, and elaborating the other "side." In this way, we affirm their ultimate unity, even if that unity is beyond our ability comprehensively to articulate.

CONCLUSION

In sum, one of Van Til's most helpful insights throughout his career was his insistence that unbelieving thought is necessarily dialectical. When we see this properly, we are better equipped to "destroy the strongholds raised up against the knowledge of God."(1 Cor. 10:5, ESV) If the principles of continuity and discontinuity are not as clear or useful, another way that Van Til expresses the dialectic is "rational/irrational." In all unbelieving thought, there will be attempts at unity, at an overall interpretation or meaning. But there will, at the same time, be pronouncements of freedom, of individuality, of the indeterminate. These two—the universal (unity) and the particular (individuality)—lay at the root of unbelief, and it is useful, apologetically, to recognize them and perhaps point to them as providing the destruction of thought and meaning. All unbelieving thought is caught in an irresolvable dialectic, and thus is built on quicksand.

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The reason for this dialectic, as I have tried to show elsewhere,[33] is that all people, because they are made in the image of God, have, by God's activity and providence, the true knowledge of God. This is what Calvin called man's *sensus divinitatis*, or sense of divinity. It is this *sensus* that motivates people to subsume what they believe into some kind of meaningful unity. No matter how disparate people may claim their own views to be, there will always be this push to bring together their thinking and their lives under something beyond their own existence. This was the force of the statement, quoted by the apostle Paul, "In him we live and move and have our being," (Acts 17:29, ESV). That statement, borrowed from Epimenides, was an attempt to bring human existence into some kind of unity.

But, always and everywhere, along with this *sensus*, there is suppression of the truth that we know. So, even as Epimenides wrote that statement, the "him" that was meant to unify humanity was Zeus, and not the true God. Thus, the rational *sensus* was distorted and perverted by the irrational *suppression* so that the statement made by Epimenides was caught in the dialectic that is everywhere typical of unbelief.[34] Paul, of course, redeemed the statement by referring it, not to Zeus, but to the true God whom he had just proclaimed to them in Athens. Thus, the rational/irrational dialectic of pagan Greek thought was transformed into the biblical "limiting concepts:" "in him" ("principle of continuity") and "we live and move and have our being." ("principle of discontinuity").

With this, we can close our introduction to this important work by Dr. Van Til, which he saw as a supplement to his *Defense of the Faith*. This is a book that shows Van Til's application of Reformed apologetics to numerous ideas, various people in the history of the church, and contemporary Protestant and Catholic theologians. Van Til was able to see the "big ideas" in these many thinkers and theologians, expose the unbelief resident in those ideas, and point a Christian way forward in each case. *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* is, in one sense, a bird's-eye view, albeit a critical one, of church history, from the 2nd century A.D. to Van Til's day, wherein the value of Reformed theology is seen and applied apologetically by Van Til's constant defense of it.

If I were to recommend a course of reading and study in Van Til's works, I would recommend that one begin with *The Defense of the Faith*, followed by *Common Grace and the Gospel*, and then work through this excellent study. With those

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33. See, for example, K. Scott Oliphint, "The Irrationality of Unbelief" in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, K. Scott Oliphint, and Lane G. Tipton, eds. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 2007), 59–73.

34. I attempt to frame Van Til's rational/irrational dialectic in the biblical categories of sensus/suppression. See K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), esp. 148–150.

three books, the substance of Cornelius Van Til's long and productive career, as he sought to reform the discipline of Christian apologetics, will be well in hand. With those three, a Reformed covenantal apologetic should be well understood.

K. Scott Oliphint
Westminster Theological Seminary
August, 2022

This is a partial PDF sample of the book, and should not be cited. Some pages and blanks have been removed.

A CHRISTIAN THEORY *of* KNOWLEDGE

· 1 ·

PRELIMINARY SURVEY

The present chapter offers to the reader a preliminary survey of the contents of this work. It strives especially to indicate in a broad way the method of reasoning that is to be pursued.

In this work the Christian position will be set forth first. Then the non-Christian view will be presented. After that the argument for the truth of the Christian position will be put forward.

As already indicated in the preface, it is impossible to set forth the Christian position without considering the different interpretations that have been given of it. In particular, the difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism must be noted. This implies that the difference in method of reasoning between a Protestant and a Romanist defense of Christianity must be explained.

Another difference also comes into view at this point. All Protestants will agree with one another that the doctrines of Protestantism must be defended as over against Romanism. But not all agree that there is a distinctly Protestant method of defending Christianity as a whole. Some hold that Protestants should first join the Romanists in order with them to defend the doctrines that they have in common. All Christians, we are told, believe in God. All believe that God has created the world. All Christians hold that God controls the world by his providence. All believe in the deity of Christ. These and other doctrines may therefore be defended in the same way by all Christians. There is no specifically Protestant way of defending the Christian doctrine of God. How could there be since this is the common property of all Christians?

Other Protestants contend that there must be a specifically Protestant defense of all Christian doctrines. Their argument is that all Christian doctrines are interdependent. Each major doctrine implies all of the others and colors all of the others. A Protestant's doctrine of the atonement will, to some extent, color his doctrine of God and vice versa. In fact, the difference with respect to all other doctrines rests ultimately on a difference with respect to the notion one has of God.

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But what, it will then be asked, is the difference between a Protestant and a Romanist doctrine of God? The answer given is that the Protestant doctrine of God stresses his self-sufficiency and therefore his ultimate control over all that comes to pass in the course of the history of the world. The Romanist doctrine of God, while also speaking of God's self-sufficiency, none-the-less compromises it to some extent. It does this by virtually ascribing to man a measure of self-sufficiency. And by ascribing a measure of self-sufficiency or ultimacy to man, God is in a measure made dependent upon man.[1]

It is natural, then, to ask how this difference between the Romanist and the Protestant concept of God should necessitate a specifically Protestant defense of Christianity as a whole. The reply would be as follows: The Protestant doctrine of God requires that it be made foundational to everything else as a principle of explanation.[2] If God is self-sufficient, he alone is self-explanatory. And if he alone is self-explanatory, then he must be the final reference point in all human predication. He is then like the sun from which all lights on earth derive their power of illumination. You do not use a candle in order to search for the sun. The idea of a candle is derived from the sun. So the very idea of any fact in the universe is that it is derivative. God has created it. It cannot have come into existence by itself, or by chance. God himself is the source of all possibility, and, therefore, of all space-time factuality.[3]

On the other hand, if God is not self-sufficient and self-explanatory then he is no longer the final reference point in human predication. Then God and man become partners in an effort to explain a common environment. Facts then are not what they are, in the last analysis, by virtue of the plan of God; they are partly that, but they partly exist in their own power. The human mind, then, need not subject itself to the revelation of God as absolutely authoritative for him.

1. KSO: Van Til has in mind here the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on free will. Note: "If anyone says that man's free will moved and aroused by God, by assenting to God's call and action, in no way cooperates toward disposing and preparing itself to obtain the grace of justification, that it cannot refuse its assent if it wishes, but that, as something inanimate, it does nothing whatever and is merely passive, let him be anathema," Henry Joseph Schroeder, ed., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Charlotte, N.C.: TAN Books, 2011): Canon 4, p. 76. Such a view of free will amounts to human autonomy, which the Reformed summarily rejected. This view of autonomy informs virtually everything Van Til will say about the Roman Catholic position, and so should be kept in mind all along.

2. KSO: Van Til is highlighting the Reformed affirmation that God is the *prinicipium essendi*, the principle or foundation of existence. He alone exists in and of himself; everything else that is exists by his free determination. See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725: Prolegomena to Theology*, Volume 1, 126.

3. KSO: As Van Til will go on to elaborate, this is crucial to recognize when we speak of "facts" in apologetics. True knowledge of any fact must include the reality that God is its creator and sustainer, and is revealed in and through the facts of creation. Without that recognition, knowledge of a fact is fundamentally, *principially*, flawed.

Man may then defer to God as to an expert who has had greater experience than himself, but he need not make all thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ.[4]

The Christian cannot, on this view, indicate to the non-Christian that the non-Christian position is destructive of experience. Nor can he make plain to the non-Christian that Christianity will give him, and will *certainly* give him, what he needs. The essence of the non-Christian position is that man is assumed to be ultimate or autonomous. Man is thought of as the final reference point in predication. The facts of his environment are "just there"; they are assumed to have come into being by chance. Possibility is placed above both God and man alike. The laws of logic are assumed as somehow operative in the universe, or at least as legislative for what man can or cannot accept as possible or probable. If a god exists, he must at least be subject to conditions that are similar to, if not the same as, those to which humanity itself is subject.

How then we ask is the Christian to challenge this non-Christian approach to the interpretation of human experience? He can do so only if he shows that man *must* presuppose God as the final reference point in predication. Otherwise, he would destroy experience itself. He can do so only if he shows the non-Christian that even in his virtual negation of God, he is still really presupposing God. He can do so only if he shows the non-Christian that he cannot deny God unless he first affirm him, and that his own approach throughout its history has been shown to be destructive of human experience itself.[5]

The Romanist method of defending God does no such thing. It does not, to be sure, agree with the non-Christian position in assuming that *man* must deliberately be made the final reference point of human predication. On the other hand, it does not clearly insist that *God* be made the final reference point. In other words, the Romanist position is a compromise between the Christian and the non-Christian view on the matter of the final reference point of human experience. Hence it cannot distinguish clearly between the two positions. On

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4. KSO: See 2 Cor. 10:1–5.

5. KSO: This paragraph highlights the various ways the notion of "presupposition" or "presupposing" is used by Van Til. He first asserts that man "must presuppose God as the final reference point in predication." The force of this "must" is not only *ethical*, in that God requires that we see him and his character in all that exists, but it is also the case that there is no meaning to human experience unless God is recognized as its foundation. That is a crucial part of our apologetic argument. But Van Til then notes that the non-Christian "even in his virtual negation of God. . . is still really presupposing God." This may seem initially to be at odds with his first notion of presupposition. How is it that the non-Christian "must" presuppose God when, even in his negation of God, the non-Christian "really" presupposes God? This second use of "presupposition" is a recognition of the state of affairs as they *actually* ("really") obtain. The non-Christian could not utter a word, think a thought, or even argue *against* Christianity, unless God had created him, sustained him, and gave him "life and breath and all things," (Acts 17:25). It is important and crucial, apologetically, to recognize these distinctions in the notion of "presupposing" or "presupposition."

the one hand, it cannot consistently show that the non-Christian view is ruinous to man. On the other hand, it cannot consistently show that the Christian position means salvation for human experience.

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Up to this point in our discussion it has been assumed that all Protestants agree in thinking of God as all-sufficient and as self-explanatory. This assumption must now be examined. Why does one group advocate the idea that there is a distinctly Protestant method of defending Christianity in all of its doctrines? Why does the other group maintain that Protestants should first join Roman Catholics in defending doctrines they have in common with them in order then to go on to the defense of the specific Protestant teachings? The only reason that can be found is that the second group is basically sympathetic to the Romanist view of man as being, in part, autonomous.

We refer now to those Protestants who are usually spoken of as *evangelicals* as distinct from those who embrace the Reformed Faith. Under the term *evangelicals* we include all those who hold to the Remonstrant or Arminian view of man in his relation to God. We include also the Lutherans. To be sure, Lutherans are not by any means to be identified as Arminian in every respect. But on the point at issue their view is basically the same as that of the Arminians. The point is that both Arminians and Lutherans maintain that man has a measure of ultimacy or autonomy. In this respect they resemble the Roman Catholics. The measure of autonomy ascribed to man is much smaller in the case of many Arminians and Lutherans than it is in the case of the Roman Catholics. Even so, *any* measure of autonomy ascribed to man implies a detraction from the self-sufficiency of God. It implies that God can no longer be taken as the final reference point in human predication. It is expected, then, that evangelicals, holding as they do in their theology to the idea of man as having some measure of ultimacy, will also maintain that Protestants may and even must join with Roman Catholics in defending certain doctrines that they have in common. They will hold that only after certain doctrines that Roman Catholics and Protestants hold in common have been defended against the non-Christian by both groups standing side by side, will there be occasion for Protestants to go on to the defense of their own teachings.[6] Then

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6. KSO: Consistent with and entailed by the notion of "free will" mentioned above in footnote 1, is the supposition of human reason as virtually unaffected by the fall of man into sin. This is a serious problem that the Reformed had to address during the time of the Reformation. Note: "The critique leveled by the Reformation at medieval theological presuppositions added a soteriological dimension to the epistemological problem. *Whereas the medieval doctors had assumed that the fall affected primarily the will and its affections and not the reason, the Reformers assumed also the fallenness of the rational faculty:* a generalized or "pagan" natural theology, according to the Reformers, was

this defense of their own teachings will have to be against Roman Catholics as well as against unbelievers.

Over against these convictions of the evangelicals with respect to the method of defense of the Christian Faith stands the position of Reformed theology. Reformed theology holds to the self-sufficiency of God without compromise. It therefore rejects every form of human autonomy. Only on the assumptions of divine self-sufficiency and man's complete dependence upon God can the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian points of view be clearly made out. Only thus can the issue be clearly drawn. The non-Christian assumes that man is ultimate, that is, that he is not created. Christianity assumes that man is created. The non-Christian assumes that the facts of man's environment are not created; the Christian assumes that these facts are created. The Christian has derived his convictions on these matters from Scripture as the infallible Word of God. *As self-explanatory, God naturally speaks with absolute authority. It is Christ as God who speaks in the Bible. Therefore the Bible does not appeal to human reason as ultimate in order to justify what it says. It comes to the human being with absolute authority.*[7] Its claim is that human reason must itself be taken in the sense in which Scripture takes it, namely, as created by God and as therefore properly subject to the authority of God.[8]

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not merely limited to nonsaving knowledge of God—it was also bound in idolatry. This view of the problem of knowledge is the single most important contribution of the early Reformed writers to the theological prolegomena of orthodox Protestantism. Indeed, it is the doctrinal issue that most forcibly presses the Protestant scholastics toward the modification of the medieval models for theological prolegomena," Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003): 108, my emphasis.

As Van Til notes, many Protestants join with the medievals in this notion of human reason. See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976). Note also a less-than-Reformed assessment of total depravity, "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." R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Art Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense Of The Christian Faith And A Critique Of Presuppositional Apologetics*, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984), 537, my emphasis. This is one of the primary reasons why a so-called "classical" apologetic approach goes against the theology of the Reformation.

7. KSO: Alongside the *principium essendi*, noted above, the second of two *principia* argued by Reformed theology, is the *principium cognoscendi*, the foundation of knowledge. Our foundation of knowledge can be none other than God's self-attesting revelation. These two *principia* entail each other, given creation. If one really holds to the self-sufficiency of God, one must hold as well to the self-sufficiency and self-attestation of his revelation.

8. KSO: This is a standard Reformed understanding of reason. Note, for example, Francis Turretin: "The question is not whether reason is the instrument by which or the medium through which we can be drawn to faith. For we acknowledge that reason can be both: the former indeed always and everywhere; the latter with regard to presupposed articles. *Rather the question is whether it is the first principle from which the doctrines of faith are proved; or the foundation upon which they are built*, so that we must hold to be false in things of faith what the natural light or human reason

It is, therefore, required of man that he regard himself and his world as wholly revelatory of the presence and requirements of God. It is man's task to search out the truths about God, about the world and himself in relation to one another. He must seek a "systematic" arrangement of the facts of the universe. But the "system" that he thus tries to form is not the sort of system that the non-Christian is seeking to make for himself.

The two systems, that of the non-Christian and that of the Christian, differ because of the fact that their basic assumptions or presuppositions differ. On the non-Christian basis man is assumed to be the final reference point in predication. Man will therefore have to seek to make a system for himself that will relate all the facts of his environment to one another in such a way as will enable him to see exhaustively all the relations that obtain between them. In other words, the system that the non-Christian has to seek on his assumption is one in which he himself virtually occupies the place that God occupies in Christian theology. Man must, in short, be virtually omniscient. He must virtually reduce the facts that confront him to logical relations; the "thingness" of each thing must give up its individuality in order that it may be known; to be known, a thing or fact must be *wholly* known by man.[9]

It is true that in modern thought there seems to be no such striving after exhaustive knowledge. But the reason for this seeming "irrationalism" of modern thought lies in the fact that it puts great stress upon another non-Christian assumption: that all reality is temporal throughout.[10] Hence all facts are assumed

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cannot comprehend. This we deny," Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 24, my emphasis.

9.   KSO: There are a number of epistemological assumptions in this paragraph. It is important to note that Van Til is discussing *systems* of knowledge. People, of necessity, think in terms of systems. A particular thing—a tree, for example—is known according to its own properties, including its species. That species is known according to its genus, and a genus is related to a family, an order, a class, a phylum, and a kingdom. Even if such categories are not known, we always relate particular "things" to properties of its species. When we say, "There is a tree," we have some, perhaps rudimentary, knowledge of what "treeness" is and how that tree and its class are related to and different from other trees, shrubs, etc. We also know how such trees are not rocks, dogs, or stars. This "*systematic*" understanding of knowledge requires, in principle, knowledge of all things, both as *related* ("treeness") and as *distinct* (not a rock or a dog) in order to know that fact for what it is. Thus, there must be exhaustive knowledge *somewhere* if there is to be true knowledge *anywhere*. For the non-Christian, the only point of reference is man himself. Man must have, in principle, exhaustive knowledge in order truly to know a thing and its "thingness." For the Christian, God has exhaustive knowledge. The Christian need not refer all things to human knowledge, but instead recognizes each thing according to that which God creates and sustains, and through which he "speaks" (cf. Ps. 19:1–2). This is, in part, what it means for the Christian to "think God's thoughts after him."

10.   KSO: Since modern thought denies the existence of God, and since it relies only on its own resources for knowledge, reality must itself be *only* temporal.

to be what they are simply as products of chance. This assumption was implied in ancient non-Christian thought as well as in modern non-Christian thought. But it was not until modern times, especially since the time of Kant, that this assumption has come clearly to the foreground. In consequence, modern thought speaks of its systems as being limiting concepts or ideals. The ideal is still that of complete comprehension for man.

The system that Christians seek to obtain may, by contrast, be said to be *analogical. By this is meant that God is the original and that man is the derivative. God has absolute self-contained system within himself.* What comes to pass in history happens in accord with that system or plan by which he orders the universe. *But man, as God's creature, cannot have a replica of that system of God. He cannot have a reproduction of that system.* He must, to be sure, think God's thoughts after him; but this means that he must, in seeking to form his own system, constantly be subject to the authority of God's system *to the extent* that this is revealed to him.[11]

For this reason all of man's interpretations in any field are subject to the Scriptures given him. Scripture itself informs us that, at the beginning of history, before man had sinned, he was subject to the direct revelation of God in all the interpretations that he would make of his environment.

It is of basic importance to understand what is meant by saying that the human system should be *self-consciously analogical*. For there are many non-Christians who also speak of their systems as analogical. But when they do, they simply mean that man cannot exhaustively explain reality to himself, and that, therefore, he projects the idea of a god who does. Then he adds that man is dependent upon this god, but in reality this is not true. For the god whom the non-Christian speaks of is in fact a projection, or limit. He is not self-contained. It is man who is assumed to be original and God is assumed to be derivative. So non-Christian systems should not be called analogical.[12]

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11.   KSO: The notion of "analogical knowledge" has a long and complex history. The term itself is not as perspicuous as it might be. It is best to see it as identical with the Reformed affirmation of human knowledge as *ectypal*. Herman Bavinck puts it this way, "The relation of God's own self-knowledge to our knowledge of God used to be expressed by saying that the former was archetypal of the latter and the latter ectypal of the former. Our knowledge of God is the imprint of the knowledge God has of himself but *always on a creaturely level and in a creaturely way.* The knowledge of God present in his creatures is only a weak likeness, a finite, limited sketch, of the absolute self-consciousness of God accommodated to the capacities of the human or creaturely consciousness," Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena,* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 212. See also Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 134, 137. Or, to put it another way, since we are image of God, we should see all of our knowledge as an "image" of God's knowledge, never identical to the archetypal knowledge of God in any way.

12.   KSO: It is likely, given Van Til's philosophical education, that he has Immanuel Kant in mind here. According to Kant, "If I say that we are compelled to look upon the world as if it were the work of a supreme understanding and will, I actually say nothing more than: in the way that

Then there is the Romanist use of the idea of analogy. Romanism thinks that it has the true idea of analogy. It holds that Protestantism, and especially the Reformed Faith, does not have a true notion of analogy since it does not do justice to man as in some measure autonomous. Roman Catholic theology will not make man fully and exclusively dependent upon God, and therefore, from a Reformed point of view, cannot do justice to the idea of analogy. It will not make a clear-cut choice between the Christian and the non-Christian position on the question of the final point of reference in predication. If man is made or assumed to be ultimate, then he is not analogous of God. Only if God is taken to be ultimate is man really analogous of God. It is only in the Reformed Faith that God is really taken to be ultimate. Hence the Reformed idea of *system* is different, not only from the non-Christian and from the Romanist, but even from the evangelical idea. We mean that so far as the evangelical holds with the Romanist that man has some measure of autonomy, he cannot do justice to the idea that the human system should aim to be analogical *and no more*.[13]

The difference between a Christian system that seeks to be consistently analogical and one, like that of Romanism and evangelicalism, that does not, is that only in the former is the *false ideal of knowledge* of the unbeliever rejected. *If one does not make human knowledge wholly dependent upon the original self-knowledge and consequent revelation of God to man, then man will have to seek knowledge within himself as the final reference point.* Then he will have to seek an exhaustive understanding of reality. Then he will have to hold that if he cannot attain to such an exhaustive understanding of reality, he has no *true* knowledge of anything at all. Either man must then know everything or he knows nothing. This is the dilemma that confronts every form of non-Christian epistemology. The

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a watch, a ship, and a regiment are related to an artisan, a builder, and a commander, the sensible world (or everything that makes up the basis of this sum total of appearances) is related to the un-known—which I do not thereby cognize according to what it is in itself, but only according to what it is for me, that is, with respect to the world of which I am a part. *This type of cognition is cognition according to analogy,* which surely does not signify, as the word is usually taken, an imperfect similarity between two things, but rather a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things. By means of this analogy there still remains a concept of the supreme being sufficiently determinate for us, though we have omitted everything that could have determined this concept unconditionally and in itself; for we determine the concept only with respect to the world and hence with respect to us, and we have no need of more," Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 108–109.

13. KSO: Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism would both affirm that man is *metaphysically* dependent on God; they would affirm that God is the Creator of all that is. However, as we noted above, because they ascribe a measure of autonomy to man's reason and will, they would hold that our reasoning faculty is *epistemologically* not dependent on God, but instead is its own initial authority. In that sense, man's reason and will cannot be *ectypal*, but are thought to be *archetypal*, even though created.

Romanist or evangelical type of argument for Christianity is not able to indicate this fact with clarity. The only way by which this dilemma can be indicated clearly is by making plain that the final reference point in predication is God as the self-sufficient One.

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So far in this chapter the general difference between a consistently Protestant or Reformed and a more generally evangelical method of reasoning has been pointed out. The Romanist-evangelical method would start reasoning with the non-Christian on a neutral basis. It would not challenge the presuppositions of the non-Christian at the outset of the argument. The reason for this is obvious. The Romanist and the evangelical are in some measure in agreement with the non-Christian on his presuppositions. They, too, attribute a measure of autonomy to man. They therefore hold that the non-Christian quite legitimately demands that Christianity shall be shown to meet the demands of the autonomous man.

These demands are, first of all, that Christianity shall be shown to be in "accord with reason." By "reason" is meant the reason of man as the determiner of the possible and the impossible by means of "logic." Only that is said to be possible which is in accord with, or at least is not against, the law of contradiction. Secondly, Christianity must be shown to be "in accord with the facts." These facts are the facts as reason, the determiner of the possible and impossible, has "discovered" or observed them.[14]

The Romanist-evangelical method of defending Christianity therefore has to compromise Christianity while defending it. If the demands of "reason" as the non-Christian thinks of it are assumed to be legitimate, then Christianity will be able to prove itself true only by destroying itself. As it cannot clearly show the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian view of things, so it cannot present any clear-cut reason why the non-Christian should forsake his position.

The Reformed method of apologetics seeks to escape this nemesis. It begins frankly "from above." It would "presuppose" God. But in presupposing God it cannot place itself at any point on a neutral basis with the non-Christian. Before

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14.   KSO: For example, Thomas Aquinas, and his followers, would affirm: "Now in those things which we hold about God there is truth in two ways (*duplex veritatis modus*). For certain things that are true about God wholly surpass the capability of human reason, for instance that God is three and one: while there are certain things to which even natural reason can attain, for instance that God is, that God is one, and others like these, which even the philosophers proved demonstratively of God, being guided by the light of natural reason," Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. the English Dominican Fathers, 5 vols. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1923–29), 1:4–5. According to Thomas, "even the philosophers proved demonstratively" that God is, and is one. This inevitably gives undue weight to unbelieving reason, assuming that all can truly know certain characteristics of God.

seeking to prove that Christianity is in accord with reason and in accord with fact, it would ask what is meant by "reason" and what is meant by "fact." It would argue that unless reason and fact are themselves interpreted in terms of God they are unintelligible.[15] If God is not presupposed, reason is a pure abstraction that has no contact with fact, and fact is a pure abstraction that has no contact with reason. Reason and fact cannot be brought into fruitful union with one another except upon the presupposition of the existence of God and his control over the universe.

Since on the Reformed basis there is no area of neutrality between the believer and the unbeliever, the argument between them must be *indirect*. Christians cannot allow the legitimacy of the assumptions that underlie the non-Christian *methodology*. But they can place themselves upon the position of those whom they are seeking to win to a belief in Christianity for the sake of the argument. And the non-Christian, though not granting the presuppositions from which the Christian works, can nevertheless place himself upon the position of the Christian for the sake of the argument.

The Christian knows the truth about the non-Christian. He knows this because he is himself what he is by grace alone. He has been saved from the blindness of mind and the hardness of heart that marks the "natural man." The Christian has the "doctor's book." The Scriptures tell him of the origin and of the nature of sin. Man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). He hates God. His inability to see the facts as they are and to reason about them as he ought to reason about them is, at bottom, a matter of sin. He has the God-created ability of reasoning within him. He is made in the image of God. God's revelation is before him and within him. He is in his own constitution a manifestation of the revelation and therefore of the requirement of God. God made a covenant with him through Adam (Rom 5:12). He is therefore now, in Adam, a covenant-breaker. He is also against God and therefore against the revelation of God (Rom 8:6–8). This revelation of God constantly and inescapably reminds him of his creatural responsibility. As a sinner he has, in Adam, declared himself autonomous.

Thus, intellectual argument will not, as such, convince and convert the non-Christian. It takes the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit to do that. But as in the case of preaching, so in the case of apologetical reasoning, the Holy

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15. KSO: This is the case, as we noted above (fn. 9), because the responsibility of reason is to think God's thoughts after him, and to systematize the facts of creation in terms, first of all, of what God has said about them. Non-Christians still *use* their reason, and *seek* to know the facts. But if their use of reason and method of knowing eliminates who God is and what he has done, then the only referent available to them is their own mind. Knowledge, then, is only and always *self*-referential, thus relative, and ultimately unintelligible.

Spirit may use a *mediate* approach to the minds and hearts of men.[16] The natural man is quite able intellectually to follow the argument that the Christian offers for the truth of his position. He can therefore see that the wisdom of this world has been made foolishness by God.[17] Christianity can be shown to be, not "just as good as" or even "better than" the non-Christian position, but the *only* position that does not make nonsense of human experience.

To this point no notice has been taken of the fact that not all Reformed theologians follow the method briefly suggested so far. What has been called the Reformed method in the preceding discussion is implied in the basic contention of Reformed theology, namely, the self-sufficiency and self-explanatory character of the triune God. But that such is the case has not always been recognized. The Reformed theologians of the Reformation period did not work out a Reformed apologetical methodology. This is not to be marveled at. They laid the groundwork for it. Some later Reformed theologians continued to use the Romanist-evangelical method of defending Christianity. At least they did so up to the point where the specifically Reformed teachings on the sovereignty of God in soteriology came up for discussion. Thus the apologetics of the Reformed theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary (prior to its reorganization in 1929 when the Reformed Faith was rejected in principle) used a method of argument similar to that employed in Bishop Butler's *Analogy*.[18] Now Butler's work is perhaps the most outstanding historical example of evangelical non-Reformed methodology. It starts with assuming that man, though he has not taken God into account, has by his own principles been able to interpret the course and constitution of nature aright.[19] Butler's argument is to the effect that, if men would only follow the same method they have employed for the interpretation of nature when they

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16.   KSO: This point should not be underestimated or overlooked. An apologetic that is consistent with Reformed theology is an apologetic that communicates the truth of God and his Word to those who are outside of Christ. As with preaching, therefore, the communication of that truth may be used by the Holy Spirit to soften hard human hearts.

17.   KSO: Notice that Van Til affirms that unbelievers can "follow the argument" that we give and can "see that the wisdom of this world has been made foolishness by God." They can do this, because they remain in God's image and they know the God of whom we speak (Rom. 1:18). In other words, they *do not* do this because of a neutral notion of reason, but because of what God says about us, and about himself in and through all that is made.

18.   *The Works of Joseph Butler*, D. C. L. ed. by The Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone, Vol. I (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1896).

19.   KSO: Van Til might have been more specific in his critique of Old Princeton and its apologetic. Since Van Til studied apologetics at Princeton under William Brenton Greene, Jr., he would have recognized Greene's allegiance to Scottish Common Sense Realism. However, both Butler and Greene argue that there are a host of commonalities between the natural man and the Christian with respect to knowledge. For more on Greene's commitment to common sense realism, see my foreword in Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 2016).

are confronted with the claims of Christianity, they will be driven to accept the latter as true. Men have seen evidence of substitution in nature and they have recognized it as such. So then, why should they not also accept the idea of the substitutionary atonement by Christ, the Son of God, as presented in Scripture? Men have admitted that the exceptional, the inexplicable, takes place in nature. There is a principle of discontinuity as well as a principle of continuity that men recognize in the world. Why then should they object to the possibility of the supernatural and of miracle? They can allow for these without in the least giving up their own basic principle of interpretation.[20]

It was against a position similar to this that Dr. Abraham Kuyper protested in his famous work *Principles of Sacred Theology*.[21] His argument is to the effect that apologetics of this nature gives over one bulwark after another to the enemy. Kuyper's contention is that the Christian must take his place directly upon the presupposition of the truth of the Christian religion as it is presented in Scripture.

In similar fashion Dr. Herman Bavinck argued that there is only one principle of interpretation for the Christian, namely, as it is objectively expressed in Scripture and as this is testified to by the Holy Spirit in the mind and heart of the believer.

Even so, both Kuyper and Bavinck did not work out their own principles fully; their primary interest was theological rather than apologetical. When they did engage in apologetical argument they sometimes employed the method which they themselves had criticized in others.

What has been called the Reformed method in the preceding discussion was, however, employed by both the men of Princeton and of Amsterdam to which reference has been made. At one point or another all the Reformed theologians of modern times argue that unless the "reason of man" and the facts of the universe be taken as they are taken in terms of the infallible revelation of God given to man in the Bible, human experience runs into the ground.[22]

It is to this basic approach of Kuyper and Bavinck, of Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos (ignoring or setting aside the remnants of the traditional method that is found in their works) that appeal is made in this work.

It is of critical importance in the current scene that a consistently Reformed apologetic be set forth. The non-Christian point of view is much more

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20. Cf. B. B. Warfield, "Apologetics," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. by Samuel M. Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1951).

21. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, tr. by J. H. DeVries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954). This is an abridgment of Kuyper's three volume work *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1908–09).

22. KSO: Importantly, Van Til recognizes that these Reformed theologians *were*, at times, consistent with their theology in their defense of Christianity.

self-consciously hostile to Christianity than it has ever been. The fact that the assumption of human autonomy is the root and fountain of all forms of non-Christian thought is more apparent than it has ever been in the past. Any argument for the truth of Christianity that is *inconsistent with itself* should not expect to have a hearing. Only a position which boldly and humbly challenges the wisdom of the world and, with the Apostle Paul, brings out that it has been made foolishness with God will serve the purpose. Only such a method which asks man to serve and worship the Creator rather than the creature honors God and assigns to him the place that he truly occupies. Only such a method is consistent with the idea that the Holy Spirit must convict and convince the sinner. The Holy Spirit cannot be asked to honor a method that does not honor God as God.

To be sure, however, objection has been raised to what has been called the Reformed method of apologetics. In his book *General Revelation and Common Grace*,[23] Dr. William Masselink, formerly of the Reformed Bible Institute at Grand Rapids, Michigan, takes exception to the position of the present writer. It will be necessary therefore to deal with this matter later. The question hinges largely on the problem of the value of the knowledge of the non-Christian. Masselink's contention is that, on the basis of the position taken by this writer, no value can be assigned to the knowledge of the unbeliever at all. This, he argues, is against the Reformed confessions. For these confessions speak of the natural light of reason by which men, though they are sinners against God, yet have natural knowledge of God and morality. In particular, God has, by his "common grace," not only restrained the sin of man but maintained the image of God in him. He thus enables him to make contributions to science and to practice "moral virtue."

In dealing with this contention an attempt will be made to show that the doctrine of general revelation and of common grace must not be taken as justifying a neutral area between the non-Christian and the Christian. There is no escape from taking it as such unless, with Calvin, appeal is made to the knowledge of God which the natural man inescapably has (Rom 1:19–20; Rom 2:14), but which he seeks to, but cannot wholly, suppress (Rom 1:18).[24]

As far as the principle of interpretation is concerned, the natural man makes himself the final point of reference.[25] So far, then, as he carries through his principle, he interprets all things without God. In *principle* he is hostile to God. But he cannot carry through his principle completely. He is restrained by God from

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23. William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953).

24. KSO: This one sentence is as concise a summary of Van Til's apologetic approach as one is likely to find.

25. KSO: Van Til refers here to the "principle" of interpretation. This is the all-important apologetic point. On what *principle*, or *foundation*, does the natural man purport to know anything?

doing so. Being restrained by God from doing so, he is enabled to make contributions to the edifice of human knowledge. The forces of creative power implanted in him are to some extent released by God's common grace. *He therefore makes positive contributions to science in spite of his principles and because both he and the universe are the exact opposite of what he, by his principles, thinks they are.*

As against this method of approaching the question of the knowledge of the non-Christian, Masselink argues, with the late Dr. Valentine Hepp of Amsterdam, that there are *central* truths about God, man, and the world on which Christians and non-Christians do not greatly differ. That is to say, Masselink, following Hepp, does not signalize, first, the difference between the two principles of interpretation, the one based on the assumption that man is ultimate and the other based on the assumption that man is the creature of God. Common grace is, in effect, used to blur the differences between these two mutually exclusive principles. There is supposed, then, to be some area where the difference between these two mutually exclusive principles does not very greatly count. There is a "twilight zone" where those who are enemies fraternize and build together on the common enterprise of science; there is an area of commonness without difference, or at least without basic difference. It is the contention of this writer that in this manner the doctrine of common grace becomes a means by which a specifically Reformed conception of apologetics, and therefore a consistently Christian method of apologetics, is suppressed. In other words, it will be shown that what was done at Princeton when Butler was used as a sample of true methodology is now being done more self-consciously by means of "common grace." Naturally, a method such as is set forth in this book will need to relate the doctrine of common grace to the sovereignty of God in such a way as to express instead of blur it.

It will be plain from the foregoing that the question of a truly Christian method of defending Christianity is very much a matter of dispute. Naturally, a method such as is set forth in this book will appear to many to be very "dogmatic and absolutistic." The non-Christian is to be told that his basic assumption is mistaken, that on his assumption experience is reduced to that which has no meaning. The Roman Catholic is to be told that his theology involves a compromise with the "natural man" and that therefore his method of apologetics is internally inconsistent and cannot challenge the natural man. The evangelical is to be told that he, too, has to some extent made compromise with "the enemy," allowing him such rights as no creature should claim for himself. The time-honored method of apologetics followed by great Reformed theologians of "old Princeton" is to be assailed as inconsistent with the theology that these very men taught us to embrace. And, finally, the theory of common grace, we are boldly

told, is not given its proper place by such great Reformed theologians as Kuyper, Bavinck and Hepp.

Here the following remarks are in order. In the first place, every Christian must tell the non-Christian that he must be *saved* from his false views of God and himself. The greatest love can be shown for the lost only by those who have themselves sensed most deeply the lost condition from which they have been saved. The best physician is he who tells the patient who needs surgery that he must be rushed to the hospital, not he who tells him to take a strong sedative. It is this that the present writer has learned from those from whom he has been bold enough to differ at points. It is only in a subordinate way that he differs from the great theologians of the preceding generation. The greater part of what is presented here is due to the fact that the writer stands on the shoulders of the great Reformed thinkers mentioned above. He is merely gathering together the thoughts found over a widely diversified body of their writings in order to present briefly that which basically they have taught. The present book is no more than an effort to stimulate thinking along the lines of a consistent Christian approach to modern thought. The message of Christianity must ring out clearly in the modern tumult. If Christianity is to be heard above the din and noise of modern irrationalism and existentialism, it must think in terms of its own basic categories. If it has to import some of its materials from the enemy, it cannot expect effectively to conquer the enemy. It is the Christian Faith that alone has the truth; this should be its claim. It should be made with all modesty; those who have accepted it once were blind. They have been saved by grace. Little would it behoove them to regard themselves as the source of wisdom. But disclaiming themselves as the source of wisdom, they cannot make apology for God and for Christ the Son of God. If men would be saved, if they would save their culture as well as themselves, they must meet the requirements of God. There is no other way to truth. "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that the world by its wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save those that believe" (1 Cor 1:20–21).

This is a partial PDF sample of the book, and should not be cited. Some pages and blanks have been removed.

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