

# **A CRITIQUE OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL**

Being a Defence of Traditional Evidential Christian Apologetics

“King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.” Acts 26:27

By D. R. Trethewie of the Reforming and Congregational Church East Geelong

Copyright © 2002

Previous editions 1977, 1978, 1998, 1999, 2001

‘So we cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns its proper functions from Scripture.’

Cornelius Van Til

‘Shall we deny the possession of intellect to those (the heathen philosophers) who drew up rules for discourse, and taught us to speak in accordance with reason?’

John Calvin

‘Even Calvin.....did not bring out with sufficient clearness at all times that the natural man is as blind as a mole with respect to natural things as well as with respect to spiritual things.’

Cornelius Van Til

‘Shall we say that the philosophers, in their exquisite researches and skillful description of nature, were blind?’

John Calvin

‘The heathens had the imperfections of the mind (due to the fall) repaired in natural and civil knowledge as much as we.’

Thomas Goodwin, a member of the Westminster Assembly

‘The Scripture ascribes a knowledge of God to all nations in the world (Romans 1:19); not only a faculty of knowing, if they had arguments and demonstrations, as an ignorant man in any art has a faculty to know; but *it ascribes an actual knowledge* (verse 10), ‘manifest in them’; (verse 21) ‘They knew God’, *not they might know him*; they knew him when they did not care for knowing him. The notices of God are *as intelligible to us by reason, as any object in the world is visible*; he is written in every letter.’

Stephen Charnock, Pastor in Southwark, Fellow and Senior Proctor, Oxford

‘I have digressed because of the extreme prejudice which both religion and philosophy have received and may receive by being commixed together; as that which undoubtedly will make an heretical religion, and an imaginary fabulous philosophy.’

Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning, Book 2, VI:1

## CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	7
Apologetic Theology .....	9
Acknowledgments .....	9
INTRODUCTION.....	10
HIS POSITION .....	11
HIS DECEPTIVE SUBTLETY .....	12
Combining Princeton and Amsterdam in Apologetics .....	12
Affirmation of Contradiction.....	12
Scripture and Reason .....	13
A Firm Rejection of Reason .....	15
Van Til Answers Criticism.....	15
THE MAIN FEATURES OF HIS SYSTEM.....	17
The Theistic Proofs.....	17
His Opposition to the Empirical Proofs of God’s Existence .....	18
Scriptural Validation of the Traditional Theistic Proofs .....	18
Deceptive Subtlety Confusion and Contradiction Again.....	19
Refutation of the Ontological Proof .....	20
Natural Theology .....	22
The Limitations of Natural Theology .....	22
The Traditional Apologetic.....	23
Common Ground .....	24
Calvin’s Testimony to Common Ground .....	25
The Gospel and Common Ground.....	25
Christian Education .....	26
FALLEN MAN’S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD .....	27
Van Til’s Contradictory Stance .....	27
COMPLEX AND CONFUSING TERMINOLOGY .....	30
Van Til’s Exposition of the Fall .....	30
The Contrast of the Simplicity of Scripture.....	31
VAN TIL AND KANT .....	33
The Significance of Immanuel Kant to Van Til .....	33
More Confusion .....	34
A Proper Perspective of Kant’s System.....	34
Van Til and Kant .....	35
A Banner of Truth Review .....	37
The Key Doctrines of Van Til Listed .....	37
Biblical Presuppositions .....	38
Biblical Categories and Epistemology.....	40
True Interpretation .....	40
The Categories Considered Further .....	41
Categories Temporal or Eternal.....	42
Recapitulation.....	43
The Myth of Academic Neutrality.....	43
Van Til’s Doctrine Outrageous.....	45
The Threat to Christian Liberty .....	46
Autonomous Man .....	47
Transcendental Method .....	50

Van Til's Idealistic Leaning .....	52
A Helpful Explanation of the Various Phases of Philosophy .....	52
Bringing the Indictment Home .....	53
Recapitulation .....	53
<b>PANTHEISTIC LEAVEN</b> .....	54
Temporal Categories and God's Transcendence .....	54
A Startling Remark .....	54
God's Transcendence Out of Sight .....	55
A Possible Mitigated Sense .....	55
The Mitigated Sense Unsatisfactory .....	55
Reason as an Ultimate Starting Point .....	56
Classifying Views of the Relation of Reason to God .....	56
Pantheism and the Destruction of Reason .....	57
Van Til's Explicit Rejection of the Law of Contradiction .....	58
Recapitulation .....	58
The Existence of God and the Creation .....	58
<b>CALVIN'S POSITION</b> .....	60
Van Til and the Heavenly-Earthly Distinction in Calvin .....	60
Answers to Van Til .....	61
The Necessity of Heavenly Wisdom .....	62
Recapitulation .....	62
Further Points from Calvin .....	62
Contradiction and Subtlety Again .....	63
Van Til Misinterprets Calvin .....	63
<b>INNATE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD</b> .....	65
A Fine Distinction .....	66
Calvin and Van Til .....	67
<b>1 CORINTHIANS 2:14</b> .....	69
<b>THE SEVENTEENTH CENURY ENGLISH DIVINES</b> .....	72
A Matter of Contention .....	73
The Divines Themselves .....	73
William Twisse (~1575-1646) .....	74
John White (1574-1648) .....	74
John Arrowsmith (1602--1659) .....	74
William Bridge (~1600-1670) .....	74
Anthony Burgess .....	75
Edmund Calamy (1600-1666) .....	75
Thomas Goodwin (1600-1679) .....	75
John Owen (1616-1683) .....	76
Thomas Manton (1620-1677) .....	77
Matthew Poole (1624-1679) .....	77
Stephen Charnock (1628-1680) .....	78
Thomas Watson (D.O.B. not known, died supposedly 1689 or 1690) .....	79
<b>ARISTOTLE</b> .....	81
Preliminary Considerations .....	82
Aristotle and the Doctrine of God .....	83
Aristotle and Pantheism .....	84
Ockham Duns Scotus and Aristotle .....	84
Aristotle's Philosophy in General .....	85

CONCLUSION .....	87
APPENDIX—JAMES BUCHANAN’S TESTIMONY .....	89
Faith and Reason .....	89
Van Til’s Position is not Original.....	89



## PREFACE

The importance of examining the teachings of Cornelius Van Til lies in his prominent influence in current Reformed circles, which stemmed from his Professorship of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. His doctrines are steadily asserted now by a number of Christian teachers. Our concern is highlighted by the setting forth of his system in the *Banner of Truth Magazine* in 1976. There were two Book reviews (see below page 37), and then a reference in the November issue No. 158, in the article 'James MacGregor and his Significance', by John Keddie. Not only is Van Til's scheme espoused, but a direct attack is made upon the apologetics of the "Reformed men on both sides of the Atlantic", who lived in the nineteenth century, *Op. cit.* Page 30. Keddie even asserts that our British/American Reformed apologetic "contributed to a considerable degree to the demise of Evangelical Churches into the twentieth century." *Ibid.* This is too much! Apart from the fact that this apologetic is correct, which is readily seen when it is set off against the vagaries of Kuyperianism, the general abounding of sin and hardness of heart in unbelief, and the neglect of sound expository preaching, with God withdrawing his arm, are quite sufficient to account for the demise of evangelicalism at any time, as now, without the need to make a scapegoat of an orthodox aspect of Christian teaching.

It has been suggested to me that the question at issue is not of much practical import. If we ignore Van Til's apologetic, if we cut off the first section of Charles Hodge's Systematic Theology (which discusses the same matters in a more orthodox manner), it was said that little difference would be made to our teaching. We can proceed simply to preach the gospel, and expound the scriptures. I consider this to be a very unsatisfactory solution to the problem. There are practical questions involved. However, I would say first that truth for its own sake, practical consequences aside, is always of supreme importance. The ten commandments teach us that we are not to take the Lord's name in vain, which we do if we teach error in His name, and not to bear false witness. It is also plain common sense that speculative error, if indulged in, will lead to practical error in due season. The heathen philosopher Aristotle is commended by Thornwell, for his "clear and steady perception of the indissoluble connection betwixt the cogitative and practical departments of man's nature in reference to duty." Writings of Thornwell, Vol. 2, page 482, *Banner of Truth*, 1974.

It is not altogether clear yet what practical errors will bud and fruit from Van Til's system, however some points can now be made:

1. The doctrine of historical faith is obscured, as is the case in Kuyperianism generally. See Warfield's discussion in the instance of Herman Bavinck, in Selected Shorter Writings of Warfield - II, pages 115ff, edited by John E Meeter, *Presbyterian and Reformed*, 1973. Neglect of this point could leave people in their sins. I Have considered this matter in my paper 'A Critique of Kuyperianism', pages 9 to 11.
2. The principal modern challenge to conservative evangelical Christianity is rationalism. Van Til's system purports to deal with this problem but fails to define correctly the faults in rationalism, and has no hope of overthrowing it. The defence of Christianity from, and the overthrow of rationalism, requires a thorough and accurate knowledge of these matters, as well as of Scripture. As a parallel example, the Reformers used their knowledge of classical

studies, patristic literature and scholastic theology in the establishment of their system and the overthrow of the dominance of Romanism in the West.

3. Van Til leavens scripture doctrine with distortions of philosophical concepts. Christ's caveat concerning the leaven of the Sadducees in Matthew 16:6, indicates that such leaven is destructive of the sound doctrine necessary for our salvation.

4. It is too much to hope that Van Til's method will be contained by regarding it as apologetics of questionable relevance. It is clear that it is intended to be used in systematic and exegetical theology as well. Van Til himself states that "The consequences of (his) position for systematic theology.....are again far reaching." Apologetics, by Van Til, page 13, Westminster Theological Seminary, undated. As to the intended effect upon exegesis, see for example his expositions of the fall and hell in Van Til, by R. J. Rushdoony, pages 25 and 48 respectively, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960. In fact spokesmen for Van Til's system assert that it "must be appreciated in all areas of human thought and life." See page 37 of the present paper.

5. Francis Schaeffer also insists that his teaching, which is similar to Van Til's, is of great practical import. See his Escape from Reason, pages 7-8, Intervarsity Press, 1971. We are not happy with Schaeffer's practical recommendations, as I have indicated in my review of his system, 'A Critique of Francis Schaeffer.'

6. As Cornelis Pronk has shown in an article, 'The Dutch Puritans' in The Banner of Truth Magazine, Nos. 154 to 155, July/August, 1976 page 1 and following, Kuyperianism seriously disturbs the practical life of the Christian; the achievement of specified earthly goals being confused with the establishment of the kingdom of heaven. This Kuyperian streak remains strong in Van Til.

7. There is the possibility, now strongly advocated by successors of Van Til of clericalistic domination of the state, not only with a view to interfering with the legitimate natural and civil investigations and functions of non-Christians, but also of exercising outright intolerance and even persecution of both non-Christians and of Christians who do not agree with Kuyperianism. Such advocacy is linked to modern Presbyterians, who find support for such intolerance and persecution in the Solemn League and Covenant of Scotland, 1643 and 1648, see Westminster Confession of Faith, page 359, II and page 367, 1, Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1976. Thus Kuyperian ideology has now become a tool for advancing the political power of self selected individuals.

8. The Kuyperian doctrine, that there are no ordinary rational grounds for justifying the existence of God and the inspiration of Scripture, clearly allies Van Til with secular humanism, which has come to the same conclusions. The Kuyperian attempt to overcome their negation of ordinary rational functions, common to Christians and non-Christians, by resorting to assertive dogmatism, not only furnishes arguments for rationalistic sceptics to attack Christianity, but may ultimately sow seeds of scepticism among Kuyperians themselves.

At times the debate with Van Til involves subtlety, and contention with him might therefore appear vain. Theological debates however, often turn upon subtleties, and this fact should not of itself deflect us from the importance of such debates. Examples are: 1. Christ is of the

*same* substance with the Father, not of a substance *like* the Father. 2. The Scriptures *are* the Word of God, rather than just *containing* The Word of God. 3. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants believe in a real spiritual presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. As Jeremy Taylor says, "Where is now the difference? Here by *spiritually* they mean spiritual after the manner of a spirit. We by *spiritually*, mean present to our spirit only." The Real Presence, pages 13-15, cited in Knots Untied, by J. C. Ryle, page 140, James Clarke, 1964.

The opposition to Van Til that I am here proposing I hope is not simply negative. Alongside the criticism I wish to point to the older and sounder system of conservative evangelical theology, which I believe admirably sets forth, in true perspective, the doctrines under consideration. I fear that a breakdown at this point, if not countered, could spread into the whole Reformed fabric.

### **Apologetic Theology**

Apologetics is derived from 1 Peter 3:15, "be ready to give an answer (απολογία) to every man that asks you a reason (λογος) for the hope that is in you". Apologetics is not a precondition for believing the gospel of Christ which through its own abundant intrinsic evidence is self-attesting. Apologetics explains how we know that God exists and that Scripture is true, and so forms a comforting confirmation of the reasonableness of our faith. In this paper the emphasis is upon God's existence, but the validation of Scripture truth is noticed. Apologetics concerns itself also with the defence of the faith from attacks made upon it. In our generation this principally concerns rationalism, and includes false philosophy, evolution, and the German higher criticism of the Old Testament.

### **Acknowledgments**

The quotations from Van Til's Metaphysics of Apologetics, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1931, are taken from Rushdoony's Van Til, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960. Rushdoony's citations of Van Til are listed on page 51 of the latter book.

The quotation from Van Til's The Defence of the Faith, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955 on page 17 of the present paper, is taken from Colin Brown's Philosophy and the Christian Faith, page 248, Tyndale, 1969.

Some biographical information in my notes on the English Puritans has been taken from Memoirs of the Westminster Divines, by James Reid, Banner of Truth, 1982. Other details come from the cited works used, or other references available to me.

## INTRODUCTION

In examining the position of Cornelius Van Til, the principal criticism will be made, as with Francis Schaeffer, in the light of Robert Dabney's observation that: "In this (the transition stage of the corruption of God's truth by the church) the doctrines taught are still those of the scriptures, but their relations are moulded into conformity with the prevalent human dialectics." Lectures on sacred Rhetoric, page 28, Banner of Truth, 1979.

Before proceeding to this and other criticisms, Van Til's position needs to be stated, and an account of certain difficulties involved in dealing with his system is required.

## HIS POSITION

He is undoubtedly a Kuyperian. “In this country (the USA), the central figure in this (Kuyperian) school of thought has been Cornelius Van Til.....Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd are the two central figures in Europe. Van Til in America.” Van Til, by R. J. Rushdoony, page 14, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960.

In Van Til’s own words, “So far as a choice had to be made between the two positions, I took my position with Kuyper rather than with Hodge and Warfield.....Negatively Kuyper was surely right in stressing that the natural man does not, on his principles, have any knowledge of the truth.” Common Grace and the Gospel, page 184, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972. Again, “But the *reason* of sinful men will invariably act wrongly.” Apologetics, page 49. “The argument in favour of Christian theism must therefore seek to prove if one is not a Christian-theist (he means regenerate believer) he knows nothing whatsoever as he ought to know about anything.....On the contrary the Christian-theist must claim that he alone has true knowledge about cows and chickens as well as about God.” Metaphysics of Apologetics, page 194, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1931. This arrogant claim can be refuted from Scripture immediately. Paul says of an unregenerate dignitary: “I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all things whereof I am accused of the Jews: especially because I know thee to be expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews: wherefore I beseech thee to hear me patiently.” Acts 26:2-3.

Clearly Van Til, with Kuyper, in Warfield’s words, “makes too absolute the contrast between the two forms of science (i.e. non-Christian and believing Christian).” Selected Shorter Writings of Warfield - II, page 100. Thus the criticisms applied by me in general to Kuyperianism in my two previous papers on the subject, ‘A Critique of Kuyperianism’ and ‘A Critique of Francis Schaeffer’, apply also to Van Til. It is therefore not surprising to find Van Til, 1. Invalidating the theistic proofs in their traditional form. 2. Rejecting natural theology. 3. Rejecting common ground between believers and unbelievers. And, 4. Pressing the necessity for Kuyperian educational institutions.

## **HIS DECEPTIVE SUBTLETY**

Before considering the above four points further, it should be observed that there are aspects of Van Til's teaching that make it difficult to criticise. There is a deceptive subtlety in his approach. You may feel that a point that he has made is objectionable, but elsewhere he seems to affirm your belief on the same matter. On searching however, he usually states a settled opinion somewhere, and when such remarks are found, they are invariably against us. Apart from having to pick one's way through such contradictions to find his settled opinions, another feature that does not help is the confusing complexity of his terminology and expression.

### **Combining Princeton and Amsterdam in Apologetics**

I think there are a number of reasons for his deceptive subtlety. Perhaps the most significant of these is found at the foundation of his system: in that he has attempted to strike a compromise between two contradictory viewpoints, i.e. Kuyperianism and what he calls the apologetics of Old Princeton.

Rushdoony tells us that Van Til was born in Holland in 1895, came to the USA as a boy, and later received his theological training in the Princeton tradition. Thus he attempted to bring together the two systems.

Van Til himself tells us, "There were two considerations that compelled me finally to seek a combination of some of the elements of each position." (i.e. Kuyper and Princeton). Common Grace and the Gospel, page 184. In the context, as noted above, one of the two considerations was Kuyper's doctrine that the natural man 'does not have any knowledge of the truth'. The other was: "Positively Hodge and Warfield were right in stressing the fact that Christianity meets every legitimate demand of reason." Ibid. In attempting the combination, we note again that of the two he preferred Kuyper, 'I took my position with Kuyper'. However, whereas Kuyper leaves reason out, Van Til says that the evidences of Christianity (in his own version of them, please note) can be apprehended by sanctified reason, but not unequivocally by fallen reason. The people holding our position believe that the evidences of Christianity, in their traditional version, are rational, and despite much opposition and distortion by worldly men and enemies, all could see their truth, and many do, giving a valid acknowledgment of the same. Of course Van Til carries his view of the alleged rational inability of the unbeliever beyond the first truths of religion to include the knowledge of what we term natural things also, and he does not allow the distinction of religious knowledge from natural knowledge.

### **Affirmation of Contradiction**

A further feature explaining the deceptive subtlety in Van Til is his expressed delight in apparent contradictions (we believe he is involved in real contradictions): "While we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory we embrace with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory." Common Grace and the Gospel, page 9.

A faithful Christian in considering some scriptural matters may feel that a contradiction may be present, but acknowledging the possibility of weakness in perception and rational capacity, will affirm, because of confidence in the inerrancy of inspired Scripture, that the contradiction is apparent only. It is facile and confusing for Van Til to say ‘we *embrace with passion* the apparently contradictory’ (emphasis mine). The possibility of contradiction in Van Til follows obviously from his attempt to synthesise Kuyper and Princeton. Despite having said that he ‘shuns as poison the idea of the really contradictory’, Van Til greatly compounds the risk of contradiction, and adds to his deceptive subtlety, by rejecting the application of the law of contradiction (because it is a principle of reason) to Scripture, “Shall we.....say that the *contradiction* that we think we *see* (in Scripture) is no real contradiction at all? We cannot follow (this way).” Toward a Reformed Apologetic, page 4, an undated paper. See also his Introduction to Systematic Theology, pages 36 and following, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1971.

The orthodox doctrine on this matter, contrary to Van Til, is that “when we cannot understand or reconcile some part of its (the Bible’s) contents, the fault is in the interpreter and not in the text.” Five Christian Leaders, by J. C. Ryle, page 21, Banner of Truth, 1963. That is, there is no contradiction in the text, as above, the weakness is in our reasoning process. Careful application of sound principles of interpretation, involving reason, virtually dissolves such difficulties. The Westminster Confession supports this opinion, stating that an attribute of the Bible is “the consent of all (its) parts.” Chapter I:V. This meaning that there is no contradiction, and that the scriptures pass this test of reason, for it is said in the same place that this is one of the “arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.”

The Westminster Confession thus holds not only that reason, in the form of the law of contradiction, can be applied to Scripture respecting the comparison of one passage with another, but also that, on the basis of abundant internal evidence in Scripture, reason can affirm the inspiration of the same scriptures. Further an attempt to impose a pretended revelation can be rejected on rational, as well as scriptural, grounds. Thus historically have Christians opposed superstition, paraded as a heavenly revelation, not only with Scripture, but also with sound rational argument. Such is the import of the Westminster Confession’s rejection of the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation, which is said to be “repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason.” Chapter XXIX:VI.

To say that Scripture is consistent with sound reason which is within the grasp of non-Christians, is *not* to affirm that Scripture is to be squared with the tenets of a false philosophy, which is rationalism. Kuyperians seem unable to perceive the validity of this distinction.

### **Scripture and Reason**

Van Til will not allow reason any competence to make a judgment as to the truth of the Bible. “The Scriptures nowhere appeal to the unregenerated reason as a qualified judge.....When scripture says: ‘Come, let us reason together’, it usually speaks to the people of God, and if it does speak to others, it never regards them as equal with God or as really competent to judge.” Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 29.

This is a breathtaking unabashed misinterpretation of Isaiah 1:18. The questions are: 1. Does this speak to the unregenerate? 2. Is this word restricted to the people of God? 3. Is reason a competent judge?

The context states: “Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrhah.” verse 10. Verse 18 itself states that it is addressed to those whose “sins be as scarlet.....red like crimson.” The people to whom God addresses ‘Come now, and let us reason together’, are so abandoned in iniquity that they have *forfeited* the right to be called the people of God. They are so abandoned in iniquity that they have become equivalent to the notoriously sinful Sodom and Gomorrhah. Being so bound by sin they have no right to be called regenerate, for of the truly regenerate it is said, “sin shall not have dominion over you.” Romans 6:14. Further, under the New Covenant the Gospel is no longer a possession peculiar to the people of God. We are not only at liberty to preach such texts as Isaiah 1:18 to the unregenerate, but also under a command to do so, for Christ requires that they be proclaimed “to every creature.” Mark 16:15. The fact that God calls unbelievers to ‘reason together with Him’, is a clear vote of confidence by Him in the competence of reason to judge, essential to rational responsibility, and contrary to Kuyperianism.

Van Til’s rejection of Isaiah 1:18 as a support for the competence of unregenerate reason is simply the *assertion* of his error in the face of plain Scripture. It is eisegesis, not exegesis. The Bible says, ‘Let us reason<sup>1</sup> together’. Van Til says, ‘No man, you cannot reason about these matters.’ He arrogantly asserts that reason has *no* “right to judge in matters of theology, or for that matter, in anything else.” *Ibid*. That the unregenerate can make a competent affirmative judgment of the Divine authorship and truth of the scriptures is confirmed by Paul’s remark to Agrippa, “Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.” Acts 26:27

Deceptive subtlety creeps into the picture here too. For Van Til allows reason to act as an instrument, “reason is necessary as a tool for the reception of revelation. About this point there can be little point for dispute.” Apologetics, page 47. But, as above, he denies reason the function of judgment, not only with respect to Scripture, but with regard to everything, “the unregenerate reason is entirely unqualified to judge.” Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 29. By rejecting for reason a capacity of competent judgment, he hardens his doctrine of its uselessness, despite his concession of an instrumental capacity.

It is certain that Van Til’s rejection of competence in fallen reason leaves him with a communication problem with unbelievers. To overcome this he suggests that the appeal of the Christian message should be made to what he calls “the sense of deity” in all men. *Ibid*. But in the sense intended, you don’t appeal to ideas! You appeal to the men themselves, and this implies their rational competence. Further, how do they have a valid sense of deity without at least some degree of sound judgment in their understandings?

---

<sup>1</sup> Three helpful expositions of this subject are: 1. ‘The Office of Reason in Regard to Revelation’, by James H. Thornwell, in his Writings, Volume 3, pages 183-220, Banner of Truth, 1974. 2. ‘The Bible its Own Witness’, by Robert L. Dabney, in his Discussions, Volume 1, pages 115-131, Banner of Truth, 1967. 3. In ‘Inspiration’, by John C. Ryle, in his book Old Paths, pages 3-16, James Clarke, 1972.

## A Firm Rejection of Reason

Perhaps Van Til does not mind contradictions in his position, for if he is charged with such, he will answer that this is but reason cavilling at him. According to Rushdoony, “Van Til’s approach is neither inductive or deductive, a priori or a posteriori, as these terms are historically understood, because (quoting Van Til) ‘they contemplate man’s activity in the universe but do not figure with the significance of God above the universe.’” Van Til, page 23. Van Til says, “We hold it to be true that circular reasoning is the only reasoning possible to finite man.” Ibid. page 24. One can hardly imagine a more firm rejection of reason. So if we point out contradictions in Van Til’s system, he has already indicated that it won’t make much difference to him. In passing we can notice what is fairly obvious to anyone with some knowledge of philosophy, that Van Til’s system is a priori dogmatic transcendental irrationalism, which he has attempted to give a Christian name to.

## Van Til Answers Criticism

The deceptive subtlety in Van Til’s position is well demonstrated in his response to criticism. Because he emphasises the fallen state of man’s intellect to the extent that he does, he has been accused by a Dr Masselink of producing a system in which “The break between God and ‘natural man’ is.....complete.” Common Grace and the Gospel, page 153. One could hardly blame Dr Masselink for saying this, for Van Til himself talks about there being an “absolute ethical antithesis” between God and man. Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 164.

Thus Van Til has been charged with not recognising the natural light still in man since the fall, which is referred to in the Reformed Confessions. In the book Common Grace and the Gospel, pages 148-195 Van Til has a letter called ‘A Letter on Common Grace’, written as an answer to Masselink’s criticism. Again Van Til’s deceptive subtlety is drawn forth. In the letter he shows his partial acceptance of Warfield’s criticisms of Kuyper, and his sensitivity to the charge of having departed from the Reformed Confessions. Thus he seems to oscillate back towards orthodoxy, though he clearly stops short of it. He admits, “My terminology may sometimes be ambiguous”, op. cit. page 149, and he talks about *qualifications* to his doctrines which people might miss. Behind ambiguity and qualifications he would seek to hide himself from the charges of error and contradiction.

However, if he says on the one hand that man’s rational ability is really so fallen to all objects of knowledge as to effectively not know the truth, and then turns around and says after all that fallen man does know something, then to us, in our simple way of looking at things, this is a contradiction. This is what he has done, for he has affirmed that, “Being ‘without God in the world’ the natural man yet knows God, and, in spite of himself, to some extent he recognises God.” Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 27. Also he concedes to Hodge that “there is a large element of truth in the contention that the common sense of man has not strayed so far from the truth as have the sophistications of the philosophers.” Apologetics, page 49. On the same page however, he says, “But the *reason* of sinful men will invariably act wrongly.” Ibid. Well to this we would say that he cannot have it both ways, as he tries to do. Suffice it to say at this stage, that the concessions above, which come close to our position, are not bona fide; for he says men know ‘in spite of themselves’, and he retains the opinion that their reason ‘will invariably act wrongly’.

He has been charged with rejecting common ground between unbelievers and believers, and we think that this is a fair charge. But he responds by saying that he hasn't. He says that the true account of his position is that believers have all the facts in common "metaphysically", but none in common "epistemologically". Common Grace and the Gospel, page 151. This is to concede nothing. He means by *metaphysically* that they live in the same world. By *epistemologically* he means their way of knowing the facts. If anything, Van Til has reinforced his view that there is no common ground, by this remark. That is the whole problem, does the non-Christian really know any truth? If his way of knowing the truth always distorts the facts, as Van Til alleges, then he really cannot know. Thus of course common ground in discussion is nonexistent.

Similarly with the theistic proofs. He is charged with rejecting them, but protests that he has not done so, saying, "Hence the theistic proofs are absolutely valid." Ibid. page 181. What he means is the theistic proofs reconstructed in accord with his own theory. He does reject them in their ordinary construction, saying, "How could *the theistic proofs* then be sound, for if they prove that the God of Aristotle exists, then they disprove that the God of Christianity exists." Ibid. page 182.

The deceptively subtle strain in Van Til's system has been noticed at the beginning of this discussion, so that it might be kept in mind, for I have no wish to misrepresent what he has said. This deceptive subtlety, because it provides a facility for him to answer charges, increases the difficulty of pinning him down. Thus he can change his shape like Proteus. This is a further adverse feature of his system.

## THE MAIN FEATURES OF HIS SYSTEM

In this section I want to consider more fully three of the four points raised on page 10 above, namely: 1. The theistic proofs. 2. Natural theology, and 3. Common ground.

### The Theistic Proofs

Van Til's doctrine on the theistic proofs is confusing and difficult to follow. He has not rejected them outright, as above, but has attempted to mould them into conformity with his system. "They (the theistic proofs) are true when they reflect scriptural procedure. And scriptural procedure involves making the ontological trinity<sup>2</sup> the foundation of all predication. But these arguments have often been stated otherwise. In the first place men have often formulated them and built them upon the assumption of man as autonomous.....Now it is the difference between theistic proofs when rightly and when wrongly constructed, that I have been anxious to stress." Common Grace and the Gospel, page 182.

Before proceeding I must comment that Van Til's view that men have constructed the theistic proofs 'upon the assumption of man as autonomous', is a figment of the Kuyperian imagination, falsely read into man's humble tracing of God's hand in the works of creation. Van Til's procedure caricatures the traditional theistic proofs. Anyone who speaks not the Kuyperian shibboleth is imperiously labelled 'autonomous', and charged that he would be like God. In time I hope to show that it is Van Til who would be like God, and that there is an objectionable pantheistic tincture in his system, resulting from his failure to grant to human reason the limited autonomy, which God has given it, as is attested by Romans 2:14, "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law (of Moses), do *by nature* the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a *law unto themselves* (in other words autonomous)". Emphases and interpolations mine.

Thus the form of theistic proof he approves of requires scripture revelation to validate it. This is implied in his remark that to establish the theistic proofs we must make the 'ontological trinity the foundation of all predication' because the doctrine of the trinity is revealed only in the Bible. Van Til's proof therefore is that we must put God, as revealed in Scripture, before all things. "But the best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world." The Defence of the Faith, page 120, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955. He says "men need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments." Ibid. This is a form of *a priori* proof, also called *ontological* proof. "It is only if we have a correct view of the innate knowledge of God that we can have a proper view of the value of the ontological argument for the existence of God. We then substitute the idea that the God of Scripture is the presupposition of all true interpretation for the Cartesian idea that man can begin from himself as an ultimate starting point." Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 196.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ontological trinity* I gather is his own term. In it he is combining the attempted rational proof of God's existence called 'ontological' with the scriptural doctrine of the trinity. We prefer the terms *Triune God* and *Trinity*, without the infelicitous addition of a doubtful, we would say invalid, philosophical concept. *All predication* means all things in heaven and earth, and all reasoning by man.

A further point must be added. Van Til not only asserts that Scripture is necessary to his proof, but that regeneration is also: “He (the non-Christian, who he terms ‘autonomous man’) cannot be obedient to, among other things, the ‘revelation of grace that speaks in Scripture’.” Apologetics, page 98. Of course we also teach that for man to be obedient to heavenly wisdom from the heart unto salvation, regeneration is required. However Van Til means more than this, he means that regeneration is required as well, to validly acknowledge God’s existence and Scripture’s truth.

At this stage three matters need to be dealt with. 1. The concept of an a priori ontological proof of God’s existence. 2. The necessity of Scripture to validate this proof, and 3. The need for regeneration to secure this. As a preamble it will be helpful first to examine his attitude to the empirical proofs of God’s existence.

### **His Opposition to the Empirical Proofs of God’s Existence**

When Van Til says ‘(God’s) existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world’, we might imagine he means that we observe uniformity and coherence in the creation and then infer a single Creator and Governor of the world. But this is not his meaning. He is very critical of such a method of argument, which is called empirical<sup>3</sup> (i.e. it starts from what we find in experience, and ascends from this to God): “the so-called empirical proofs for the existence of God.....as frequently agreed to by those who do not pretend to be Christians.....mean no more than that men accept a finite God.” Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 198. And, “We do not hesitate to affirm that they (the empirical theistic proofs) are invalid.” Ibid. He teaches that God revealed in Scripture must presuppose our consideration of the creature, that we must start with God, not with the creature. He thus affirms, as above, a form of a priori ontological proof of God’s existence.

### **Scriptural Validation of the Traditional Theistic Proofs**

The orthodox conservative evangelical position however, which coincides on this matter with the position of Thomas Aquinas, is that the scriptures in fact assume that men without scripture revelation have a knowledge of the true God, a knowledge that affirms his existence, but that is not able to bring them to salvation. Men infer from the marvellous creation that God has made, and from the operation of conscience within them, that there must be an *infinite* Creator and an *infinite* lawgiver to explain these phenomena, observed in the experience of everybody.

It is preposterous for Van Til, in alliance with the sophisticated academic agnostic and atheistic opponents of Christianity, to say that men who follow this natural unstrained simple process of reasoning finish up with a ‘finite God’, i.e. no God at all. The contingency (changeableness and consequent dependency) of finite beings in the world, and the marvellous supernatural design in the creatures, demand irresistibly, on solid rational

---

<sup>3</sup> Please note that strictly speaking the empirical proofs are not purely empirical or a posteriori, they do involve an a priori element, the Law of Cause. Though these proofs start in experience, from the observation of the things of God’s creation, their demonstrative power with respect to God’s existence includes the exercise of the Law of Cause, which is an axiomatic self evident law of reason in the human mind.

grounds, the affirmation of the existence of an infinite and infinitely intelligent First Cause. This fact is clearly stated by the apostle Paul, “For the invisible things of him (i.e. God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen (by the heathen without the scriptures), being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that when they knew God, they glorified him not as God.” Romans 1:20-21.

Further, the demands of conscience have no validity unless there is an infinite Lawgiver who can guarantee the enforcement of the sanctions of reward or punishment, implicit in the actions of conscience. The righteous nature of the law witnessed to by conscience also testifies to the righteousness of God. Again, the argument from conscience for the existence of God, in the absence of Scripture and regeneration, is sustained by Paul most certainly, “Who (i.e. the heathen without the scriptures) knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.” Romans 1:32.

Paul’s testimony in Scripture that the ungodly heathen ‘*knew* God’ and ‘the judgment of God’ is a complete repudiation of Kuyperianism in general, and of Van Til in particular. One can only surmise that the Kuyperian approach to Paul’s validation of the knowledge of God possessed by the ungodly heathen without the scriptures, is the same as the Arian approach to the witness of chapter 1 of John’s gospel to the true deity and eternal preexistence of the Lord Jesus Christ. i.e. The love they have for their theory is so great that they will use any sort of contorted reasoning process in their attempt to set aside the plain and simple words of the New Testament. In so doing Kuyperians are just as blatantly rationalistic as the Arians were. The Arians couldn’t imagine that Jesus could have been very God of the same substance with His Father, and the Kuyperians just cannot imagine that the ungodly heathen without the scriptures could have any *valid* knowledge of God and His judgment. Both Arians and Kuyperians have allowed their rationalistic imaginations to supersede the plain and simple testimony of Scripture.

### **Deceptive Subtlety Confusion and Contradiction Again**

I must complain again of the confusion that is evident in Van Til’s system at this point also. He says, “Even should they (the empirical theistic proofs) be stated truly (despite having said, as above, ‘*We do not hesitate to affirm that they are invalid*’!), that is should they be stated in such a manner as to make God the presupposition of the possibility of predication in every sphere of life, and men would formally assent to such a statement, it would simply mean that they must unwillingly and in spite of themselves recognise something of the truth of the revelation of God within themselves.” Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 198. By this of course Van Til would attempt to convert the empirical proofs (which are predominantly a posteriori, i.e. they ascend from the creature to God, from the effects given in experience to the First Cause not given in experience) to his own a priori version, simply presupposing God. But what are we to say of his allowing non-Christians, to be able to ‘recognise something of the truth of the revelation of God within themselves’? Well he has contradicted himself, and it is not a bona fide concession, for he says that they only do this ‘formally’ and ‘in spite of themselves’. Presumably after all, they still do not know what they are doing.

So Van Til says that they know and don't know at the same time. Substantially the same contradiction appears elsewhere in his writings. In Common Grace and the Gospel, page 190, he says that the true construction of the theistic proofs "involves interpreting human reason itself in terms of God", (i.e. reckoning reason to be created and fallen), and that only a Christian will do this. Then he states, "By nature all men seek to suppress the facts of their sinfulness and creaturehood. They cannot succeed in fully suppressing this truth." Op. cit. Well if they cannot fully succeed, then he should not have said, on the same page, "no one but a Christian will admit these two truths (sinfulness and creaturehood) about himself"! This, apart from the fact that it is wrong, is patent contradiction.

To regard revelation and regeneration as conditions necessary for the validation of his version of the a priori ontological theistic proof, is also contradictory and unreasonable. For these conditions he requires are both a posteriori and empirical. Revelation is given in experience and regeneration occurs in experience. As has been argued, neither is necessary to validate the empirical proofs. Whether the a priori ontological proof (alluded to above by Van Til when he refers to the 'Cartesian idea') has any validity has been a contentious issue in the history of Christian theology.

### **Refutation of the Ontological Proof**

The one traditional proof that we believe does not succeed is in fact the ontological proof. It is not a proof, but an attempt to justify a dogmatic assertion that God is. Given Van Til's assertion of a priori presuppositional dogmatism, "It follows that on the question of scripture, as on every other question, the only possible way for the Christian to reason with the non-believer is by way of presupposition<sup>4</sup>." Apologetics, page 99, it is understandable that he would be favourably disposed to the ontological proof. Van Til is not disposed to the presentation of evidence for consideration. He prefers sheer assertion; 'to reason.....by way of presupposition', especially according to Van Til's definition of presupposition, is contradictory, for it is not to reason at all.

Please note that Van Til does not accept the traditional ontological proof per se, e.g. as articulated by Des Cartes and before him Anselm, because he insists that Scripture's testimony to God as the Trinity, as above, is required for a valid statement of this proof. Van

---

<sup>4</sup> Francis Schaeffer, in his book The God Who is There, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, on page 177, in a glossary, defines the word *presupposition* as "A belief or theory which is assumed before the next step in logic is developed. There can be little objection to this definition as it stands. However, when we examine Schaeffer's and Van Til's (Schaeffer's presumed source of the term) usage of the term we find confusion and error. Schaeffer mentions as examples of presuppositions, *the law of contradiction* Ibid. page 13, and *the law of cause*, Ibid. page 19. Confusion results because these two examples are, according to strict philosophical definition, legitimate *axiomatic first truths* or *laws of thought*, and should not be included with theories. Theories are not simple *first truths*, they are more elaborate ideas. Also, it remains a question whether theories are true or not. Van Til particularly would not allow us to apply legitimate tests of reason to his theory. He seems to quietly assume that because he holds *Christian presuppositions*, conveniently defined by himself, that he is above the legitimate tests of reason. In passing it should be noted that whereas we hold that *the law of contradiction* and *the law of cause* are axiomatic laws of thought common to all men, Schaeffer says that these beliefs had been held historically "not for any adequate reason but because men romantically acted upon" them. Ibid. page 19. By denying the fixed truth in human reason of the *law of cause*, Schaeffer has inadvertently put himself in agreement with materialistic atheists, who do the same thing, with the ulterior purpose, which we cannot help but notice, of attempting *to destroy the validity of the empirical theistic proofs*, in support of their atheism.

Til does not allow that reason of itself can construct any Theistic proof, even though it be the ontological proof favoured by him.

Anselm (1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, is the person most notably connected with this proof. “The acute and powerful intellect of Anselm was the first to construct the ontological argument in a syllogistic form (i.e. in a form apparently compatible with Aristotelian logic). And it will appear, we think, that its first form is its best. All subsequent modifications (e.g. by Des Cartes) have weakened rather than strengthened it.” Dogmatic Theology, by William G. T. Shedd, Volume 1, page 224, Zondervan, 1969. Shedd describes the doctrine, as propounded by Anselm, as follows:

“The argument is derived, as the etymology (του οντος λογος) denotes, from the idea of *absolute* and *perfect* in distinction from relative and imperfect being. It runs as follows. The human mind possesses the idea of an absolutely perfect Being than whom a more perfect being cannot be conceived. But such perfection as this implies *necessary* existence; and necessary existence implies *actual* existence: because if a thing must be, of course it is. Etc” Idem.

The argument is ingenious, however its weakness is that its mere conception in the finite mind of man can be no guarantee of its validity. The *finite* mind of man perceives necessary existence on the basis that it has seen contingent, or dependent existence subject to change, in the creation *which necessitates* an infinite independent unchangeable First Cause to explain the origin of contingent being. In other words it is above the capacity of finite man to posit perfect existence without evidence. Discussion of this matter recurs in this paper.

Proper refutations of the ontological proof can be read in the Writings of Thornwell, Volume 1, pages 64-66 and in Lectures in Systematic Theology, by Dabney, pages 8-9, Zondervan, 1972. In summary, Dabney and Thornwell refute this proof on the grounds that the mere conception in the mind of a being, even though that being be conceived as perfect self-existent and necessary, is no guarantee of the real objective existence of such a being. Thornwell concludes: “Whatever charm this species of reasoning has for speculative minds, it is certain that it can only terminate in empty abstractions. The truth is, the secret of its influence is the firm conception and belief of a necessary being as actually existing which we derive from the cosmological proof. There (in the cosmological proof) we start out from the real (the creation) and are conducted to the real (God the Creator) in this most sublime and overpowering of all conceptions.” Op. cit. pages 65-66.

In his criticism Dabney remarks that “there are processes in which we validly determine the truth of a notion by simple inspection of its contents and conditions.” Op. cit. Those who hold the a priori method believe that *God is* is such a notion. However, to state it again simply: the mere inspection of the notion *God is* by a finite creature, man, cannot guarantee His existence. Such guarantees must be sought elsewhere. Further, God Himself cannot be inspected, John 1:18. It is a humble acknowledgment of our creatureliness that we assert that we are dependent upon a process of reasoning to infer God’s existence, from His effects. To confess that our reasoning is not presuppositional, is simply to acknowledge that we are not God. All God’s knowledge is intuitional, all of ours cannot be.

Both Thornwell, as above, and Dabney hold to the validity of the empirical proofs. Theirs is the opinion that has been held as a rule by conservative evangelicals historically. Following Romans chapter 1, we believe that the non-Christian is able thereby to acknowledge the existence of God. Van Til, who is most reluctant to grant unequivocal valid ability to man’s

rational faculty, rejects this and resorts to an innate *a priori* assertion with respect to the existence of God, and which is peculiar to Christians, controlled by Scripture and regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

Thus when Van Til talks about revelation without and within man manifesting God, he means men come to know of God's existence, not by *a posteriori* inference from the things that are made, and man's own religious and moral nature, but by an alleged *a priori* assertion, which requires Scripture and regeneration for unequivocal validation.

## Natural Theology

Van Til's rejection of natural theology is a corollary of his similar attitude to the traditional theistic proofs. Natural theology is defined as the study of those truths discoverable by the light of nature concerning God's existence and attributes, that He ought to be worshipped, and His righteous judgment against sin.

The following is a specimen of Van Til's opinion on this subject: "Paul does not teach natural theology in the first chapter of Romans." Toward a Reformed Apologetic, page 12. As above, we thought Paul did when he said in verses 20 and 32 respectively, "They (the heathen) *knew* God", and "Who (the heathen) *knowing* the judgment of God." (Emphases mine). Again, as above, Van Til is simply engaging in a rationalistic Arian-type denial of the force of Scripture to preserve at all costs the objectionable Kuyperian theory. With subtlety Van Til accepts that there is "natural revelation", see Apologetics, pages 34 to 37, which is the witness to God in the creation, but because he denies competent rational ability to unconverted man he denies that there can be a natural theology developed by man.

In justification of natural theology Dabney remarks, "Does (Scripture) rest the first truths (i.e. the knowledge of God's existence and aspects of His attributes) on pure dogmatism, or on evidence which man apprehends? The latter; and then man is assumed to have some natural capacity for such apprehension. But if nature reflects any light concerning God (as Scripture asserts [in Romans 1]), then man is capable of deriving some theology from nature." Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 6. In suggesting that *pure dogmatism* is the alternative to 'resting the first truths of religion upon *evidence*', Dabney has anticipated the nature of the irrationalistic assertive *presuppositionalism* of the twentieth century Kuyperians.

Of those who have rejected natural theology Dabney says, "These divines seem to fear lest, by granting a Natural Theology, they should grant too much to natural reason; a fear ungrounded and extreme. They are in danger of a worse consequence; reducing man's capacity for receiving divine verities so low, that the rational sceptic will be able to turn on them and say: 'Then by so inept a creature, the guarantees of a true revelation cannot be certainly apprehended.'" Ibid.

Four good arguments against those who hold the extreme view, rejecting a Natural Theology, may be read in A. A. Hodge's Outlines of Theology, page 44, Banner of Truth, 1972.

## The Limitations of Natural Theology

We readily acknowledge that Natural Theology cannot save, but this does not justify obliterating it altogether, as Van Til has done. Of the deficiency of Natural Theology Dabney remarks:

“How shall we ever tell to what degree it (our concept of God gained without Scripture guidance) may be magnified, distorted, coloured, by the imperfection of the reflecting surface (our own spirits, [made in the image of God, but fallen], from which we infer God’s attributes, by freeing our conscious apprehension of our own attributes from our defects and limitations), seeing Natural Theology can never enable us to turn around and inspect the great original (i.e. God), eye to eye. That something is there, a something vast, grand and real; *our laws of thought forbid us to doubt*; for else what was it that cast the mighty spectrum upon the disc of our reason? But reason can never clear up the vagueness and uncertainty of outline and detail, nor verify His true features. Now, when Revealed Theology comes, it enables us to make this verification; and especially when we see ‘God manifest in the flesh’, ‘the brightness of the Father’s glory, and express image of His person’.” Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 77.

Dabney then gives four reasons for the value of studying Natural Theology: “1. It teaches some truths; and no truth is valueless. 2. When Revelation comes, Natural Theology gives satisfaction to the mind, by showing us two independent lines of proof for sundry great propositions. 3. It excites the craving of the soul for a Revelation. 4. When that comes, it assists us to verify it, because it meets the very wants which Natural Theology has discovered.” Ibid.

### **The Traditional Apologetic**

Van Til is very critical of what he calls the *traditional apologetics*, meaning that of the British and American Reformed school, particularly as he has found it in the USA. He says, “Deciding to follow the Reformers in theology, it was natural that I attempt to do so in apologetics. I turned to such Reformed apologists as Warfield, Greene and others. What did I find? I found the theologians of the *self attesting Christ*, defending their faith with a method which denied precisely that point.” The Defence of Christianity and My Credo, page 82, Presbyterian and Reformed, circa 1971. So he says. The others would include Charles Hodge, for of him Van Til remarks, “It would seem that we have dropped from this high plane (of Calvinism) to the level of evangelicalism when Hodge speaks of the office of reason in matters of religion.” Apologetics, page 47.

These American theologians that Van Til criticises above, believed in the validity of the traditional theistic proofs, that reason is therefore capable of apprehending and acknowledging the first truths of religion, i.e. that God exists and that the Bible is the Word of God. Also that the unconverted are quite capable of making valid judgments concerning natural, moral and political questions. They affirm also that unbelievers, although dead to saving faith, are able to acknowledge much gospel truth, e.g. that Jesus is the Messiah. Among men who do not have saving faith there is a variety of response to the gospel, as indicated in the parable of the sower. There is not just a simple rejection of gospel truth by all men, which is asserted in the Kuyperian theory of Van Til. Some are so enthralled by Satan that they do not apprehend the spiritual blessings offered to them. Others, apprehending the blessings, take them up for a season, tasting the heavenly things, but the trials of temptation and tribulation occasion eventually their willful falling aside. Others raise up ungodly systems, with or without the name of Christ, against the truth and the real churches of the living God.

Because the best Christian expositors in British and American Reformed Christianity hold the traditional apologetic, with the support, they would strongly believe, of John Calvin, it behoves conservative evangelical Christians to study carefully this older better theology before being drawn off into the vagaries of Kuyperianism. Dabney and Thornwell in my opinion are the best spokesmen for the correct position. The Hodges and Warfield ably support this position also.

### **Common Ground**

Van Til is critical also of the idea of common ground implicit in the traditional apologetic. “On this point I may say that if the idea of neutral territory (common to Christians and unbelievers) does fairly represent the *traditional view*, then I can only disagree with it.” Common Grace and the Gospel, page 155. What he castigates is, “The Aquinas-Butler type of argument (which) assumed that there is an area of *fact* on the interpretation of which Christians and non-Christians agree.” Introduction to Warfield’s Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, page 20, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970.

Van Til suggests, as noted above, that believers and unbelievers have the facts in common, but the perspective of unbelievers so distorts the facts, that their view of them is so substantially different from that of Christians that there can be no agreement. Also, again in a contradictory and confusing fashion, Van Til concedes the need for common ground! He says common ground is required for the unbeliever to have a “standing place in order to engage in his effort by his false systems to deny the existence and work of God.” Towards a Reformed Apologetic, page 26. It is to be noticed however, that this is ground to oppose, not ground of agreement. Thus Van Til’s assertions that unbelievers have the facts in common and so that they can engage in opposition to God are a meaningless smokescreen, behind which he can plead that he has not rejected common ground whilst effectively destroying the concept of agreement between Christians and non-Christians as regards substantial areas of fact.

Now we would say that not all unbelievers deny the existence and work of God. Some do in word, and all do so, more or less, in a practical way, but many would defend the truth of His existence and work.

The apostle James teaches this clearly, “Thou believest there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe and tremble.” James 2:19. To the unregenerate king, Agrippa, Paul says, “Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.” Acts 26:27. Paul’s bold remark includes the affirmation of their common agreement in this belief. Paul also, in a spirit of gracious acknowledgment, intrinsic to the glorious gospel of peace, and quite contrary to the aggressive unfriendliness of Kuyperianism to the lost, over whom Christ would rather weep, affirmed common ground with the Greeks in Athens, when he said, “As certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.” Acts 17:28. A gracious argumentum ad hominem, to which he rejoins his agreement, “Forasmuch then as we (i.e. you and I, attested to by your own poets) are the offspring of God.” Verse 29. Jesus’ gracious and encouraging remark to a scribe, not yet a Christian, clearly acknowledges this man’s reasoning ability, “And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said to him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.” Mark 12:34. The context shows Jesus agreement with this as yet unregenerate scribe in their common affirmation of the two great commandments.

These texts destroy root and branch the pretensions of Kuyperianism. They also put to shame their explicit hostility towards unbelievers, and the arrogant claim implicit in their theory, that *they alone, as true Christians, have knowledge*. The best construction that can be put on this aspect of their theory is that it is an example of Christ being “wounded in the house of (his) friends.” Zechariah 13:6.

### **Calvin’s Testimony to Common Ground**

Calvin utterly crosses Van Til on this point. “I only wish to observe here, that this method of investigating the divine perfections, by tracing the lineaments of his countenance as shadowed forth in the firmament and on the earth, is common both to those within and to those without the pale of the Church.” Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book I, 5:6, the Beveridge Edition, James Clarke, 1962. Apart from completely validating the empirical proofs of God’s existence from His works, Calvin assures us that the method of so doing is *common* to Christians and non-Christians! Van Til’s constant claim that he is following the Reformers, particularly Calvin, is simply untrue.

### **The Gospel and Common Ground**

The gospel is a gracious message of peace. It is in the interests of the presentation of its message that as much common ground of agreement with sinners be acknowledged. The message of Kuyperianism is a fighting message, “We can never agree with you.” This is foreign to the gospel. A very important aspect of the common ground question concerns the constitution of Christ’s person. God ‘justifies the ungodly’, ‘Jesus came into the world to save sinners’.

Now an encouragement held out to sinners, the unconverted, those lost in sin and corruption, is that Christ shares our humanity, and when on earth he experienced all of our temptations without sinning, and also died for us. He did not come to fight us, but to save us. “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” John 3:17. “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” Hebrews 2:14-15. And, “For he has made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Van Til’s rejection of common ground, overlooks the conciliatory nature of the gospel, setting the gospel of peace in a bad light.

So we confess that the facts of creation and the gospel can make a valid impact upon the intellect and conscience of the sinner, causing him to acknowledge God’s existence and the truth of the gospel. Thus there is some genuine common ground.

Van Til’s espousal of the perennial philosophical sophism, prevalent in humanistic circles again today, that the *facts* are so substantially distorted by one’s perspective, that they are no

longer distinguishable as such, is discussed below, when this subject arises again in relation to his assertion that academic neutrality is a myth.

### **Christian Education**

With Kuyperianism in general, and consistently with his attitude to the intellect of the unconverted, Van Til holds the necessity of a Kuyperian Christian education. “We should as reformed Christians be able to present a well articulated philosophy of knowledge in general and of science in particular in order to justify our independent educational institutions.” Common Grace and the Gospel, page 195. And, “It will take, not merely an Arminian-evangelical, but a Reformed philosophy of Christian education in order that the downward drift toward chaos in education may be, by God’s grace, prevented.” Toward a Reformed Apologetic, page 16.

The question of so-called Christian education I have already discussed in my paper ‘A Critique of Kuyperianism’, and I do not intend to consider it in further detail here. I have called it *Kuyperian* Christian education, because that is what it is. Inasmuch as it is intended to inculcate that erroneous theory through every discipline of study, if Kuyperians are prepared to accept that there are *differing disciplines*, such education will, of itself, hardly be beneficial.

“The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.” Psalm 145:9, and He has given many wonderful intellectual gifts to unconverted men. “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.” Acts 7:22. Behold their great skill in the construction of the pyramids. Daniel was taught “the learning and tongue of the Chaldeans.” Daniel 1:4. The New Testament in its inspired original is written in Greek, a language developed by heathens, yet perfectly adapted to communicate the wonderful truths of the everlasting gospel. One can hardly imagine a firmer repudiation of Kuyperianism than this single fact.

In support of this Calvin says, “Shall we deny the possession of intellect to those (the heathen philosophers) who drew up rules for discourse *and taught us to speak in accordance with reason?*” Institutes, Book II, 2:15. Again, another firm repudiation of the exclusive imperious Kuyperian attitude to education.

## FALLEN MAN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Without Scripture fallen man cannot know God savingly. Special revelation was required, in the words of the Westminster Confession I:I, “to give that knowledge of God necessary unto salvation.” With this revelation men may possess the knowledge of an historical faith affirming the truth of Scripture, as in the case of the unregenerate king, Agrippa, to whom Paul said, “Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.” Acts 26:27. However, without regeneration by the Holy Spirit, among other things, “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God (in the gospel)”, Ibid, X:I, men do not possess “saving faith”, Ibid, XIV, which includes the love of approbation for God and the knowledge of filial fellowship.

Concerning the limitation of the knowledge of God, which men have without the scriptures, Thornwell says:

“But let us settle, in the first place, precisely the nature of that ignorance (of God, found among men *without the scriptures*) with which we have to deal. If it (that ignorance) were absolute and entire, if the reigning doctrine of the human race were the Hypothesis of Atheism, it would be impossible to vindicate Theism upon any grounds of reason.....What we affirm is, that while the existence of God and a general sense of our relations to Him are so grounded in the soul as to make man, wherever he is found, a religious creature, no just and consistent notions of His nature, His character and His attributes are anywhere compassed by natural light; and that wherever apprehended at all, He is apprehended in no such light as to generate the dispositions and emotions which constitute true piety. In other words, apart from (special) revelation, He is nowhere rightly represented in thought, and even with revelation He is nowhere truly loved and worshipped without special grace (given in regeneration).” Writings, Volume 1, pages 75-76.

One might think, as also with Dabney’s comments on the deficiency of Natural Theology, that Thornwell somewhat agrees with Van Til, when he says, that natural light cannot gain ‘just and consistent notions of his (God’s) nature, character and attributes’. This is not the case, for Thornwell says that fallen men *with the scriptures* can ‘rightly represent God in thought’, and he held absolutely to the validity of the Theistic proofs in their traditional form. Van Til would not allow either, although he might with contorted subtlety argue that he has not made man’s ignorance of God absolute.

Stephen Charnock styles the knowledge that sinful men have of God, “a relic of knowledge after the fall of Adam.” The Existence and Attributes of God, Volume 1, page 35, Baker, 1979. It is for this relic that we are contending with Van Til.

### Van Til’s Contradictory Stance

When we examine Van Til’s statements on this subject, his contradictory position, mediating between Amsterdam and Princeton, appears again. “The pressure of God’s revelation confronts every man and deep down in his heart every man knows this to be the case.” Toward a Reformed Apologetic, page 12. He then suggests that man “suppresses” this knowledge. As a point pivotal to his whole position, he gleans the word *suppress* from Romans 1:18, (American Standard Version translation). Upon this word he puts his own personal interpretation, (see Apologetics, page 56).

In the Authorised Version of the Bible the particular word, in Greek κατεχοντων, is translated *hold*, “who (the heathen) hold the truth in unrighteousness.” John Murray, once Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary, in his comment on this word says, “The usage of the New Testament in respect of this term does not provide any support for the notion of ‘holding down’ or ‘suppressing’.” The Epistle to the Romans, Volume 1, page 37, Eerdmans, 1973. Murray does not object to the idea of suppressing the truth, “This thought is true enough in itself.” Ibid. pages 36-37. He prefers, in respect of its use in Romans 1:18, the translation ‘restraining’ or ‘holding back’, though not dogmatically, and indicates that in the New Testament the word most frequently “means to ‘hold fast’, ‘possess’, ‘retain’.” Ibid. page 37.

Now even if the word ‘suppress’ is an acceptable translation, that is not the question. Van Til’s insinuated interpretation of this word is that the heathen *so* suppressed the truth that their knowledge of God intellectually became invalid. Further, and indeed by way of the contradiction typical in his system, he refuses to state unequivocally that they have ever apprehended the truth in the first place! He asserts vigorously that their ‘presuppositions’ prevented them from doing so. We would argue, that if *suppression* of the truth is what Paul means, that is fine. In the context Paul affirms unequivocally and plainly that the heathen, who *held* “the truth in unrighteousness”, in fact by the light of nature “*knew* God”, verse 21, and *knew* “the judgment of God”, verse 32. To reconcile the word *suppress* with these plain affirmations we would simply say that their intellects apprehended the truth correctly, but their perverse wills suppressed it in order that they might follow their vain affections. So we have no need to resign ourselves to Van Til’s insistent and personal interpretation of κατεχοντων. Without his peculiar interpretation Van Til’s system falls apart.

We might think that when Van Til says that *deep down* man knows, that he means he really knows. He assures us however, “This does not mean that we are thus after all granting to the natural man the ability to reason correctly.” Introduction to Warfield’s Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, page 39. No, to do so would destroy his whole position.

To cope with this contradiction, in which he has asserted, in effect, that man knows and does not know, and remember this is with respect to all knowledge, Van Til resorts to a novel “diverse and strange doctrine” (Hebrews 13:9). “To be sure, the natural man knows God.....by virtue of his old man within him he knows that he is a creature of God and responsible to God. But as far as his new man is concerned he does not know this. He will not own this. He represses it. His ethical hostility will never permit him to recognize the facts to be true which, deep down in his heart, he knows in spite of himself to be true. It is this new man of the natural man that we must be concerned to oppose. And it is to his old man that we must make our appeal.” Ibid. pages 38-39. And in case we think that the old man validly apprehends the truth, this thought is axed immediately, “Not as though there are after all certain good tendencies within this old man.....” Ibid. Such nonsense as this is unworthy of notice, except to demonstrate the self-evident folly inherent in it. Van Til tells us, ‘The natural man knows’, yet ‘will never recognize the facts to be true’. This is patent contradiction, and again, as above we must say that he cannot have it both ways.

His doctrine of an *old man* and a *new man* in the unbeliever is nowhere justified in Scripture. One could almost pardon some evangelicals for contending that there are two such in the believer, though this too is an unjustifiable interpretation of Ephesians 4:22-24, (see Dabney’s

Discussions, Volume 1, pages 189ff). Van Til's suggestion that there are two men in the unbeliever is a preposterous attempt to draw an analogy from the Ephesians passage that he thinks might help explain his contradictory doctrine of *man not knowing and yet knowing*. The true interpretation is that the old man referred to in Ephesians is fallen and a single natural man unrenewed by saving grace, following his lusts, lost and without salvation. However, Scripture also teaches that such men can accomplish much in the natural and moral realms, acknowledge the first truths of religion, and given the Bible, know truths peculiar to this revelation.

## COMPLEX AND CONFUSING TERMINOLOGY

At least two of those who have reviewed Van Til consider that there are problems with his terminology. Colin Brown remarks, "When we look at Van Til's work as a whole, even a sympathetic critic is bound to admit that some things are obscure." Philosophy and the Christian Faith, page 249, Tyndale, 1969. Paul Helm comments, "Van Til's usefulness is marred by his use of technical jargon." Banner of Truth Magazine, Nos. 82-83, page 46, 1970.

Such a style is completely contrary to Scripture, for Paul says, "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." 1 Corinthians 2:4-5. The bulk of the material of Van Til's that I have read is couched in a philosophical dialect very much of his own invention; it is not scripture exposition. This is somewhat inevitable because of his focus on the intellect and his refusal to properly distinguish theology and philosophy. As he says, "One cannot have a really Christian theology unless one also has a really Christian science and philosophy." Introduction to Systematic Theology, Preface.

### **Van Til's Exposition of the Fall**

The following is an offensive specimen of his method, which purports to be exegesis, of the scriptural account of the fall of man, taken from his Metaphysics of Apologetics, page 22:

"Eve was obliged to postulate an ultimate epistemological pluralism before she could even proceed to consider the proposition made to her by the devil. Or, otherwise expressed, Eve was compelled to assume the equal ultimacy of the mind of God, the devil, and herself. And this surely excludes the exclusive ultimacy of God. This therefore was a denial of God's absoluteness epistemologically. Thus neutrality was based upon negation. Or we may as well say that neutrality is negation.....In connection with this we may remark in passing that when Eve listened to the tempter, she not only had to posit an original epistemological pluralism, but also an original metaphysical pluralism. She had to take for granted that a time created being could reasonably consider herself to be sufficiently ultimate in her being, as to warrant an action that was contrary to the will of an eternal being. That is, she had to equalize time and eternity not only, but she had to put time above eternity. It was in time that Satan told her the issue was to be settled. He said that it still remained to be seen whether God's threats would come true. The experimental method was to be employed. Only time could tell. Now this attitude implied that God was no more than a finite God. If he were thought of as absolute, it would be worse than folly for a creature of time to try out the interpretation of God in the test-tube of time. If He were thought of as eternal such an understanding was doomed to failure, because in that case history could be nothing but the expression of God's will."

This extended quotation provides a full view of just what his method is like. It is not faithful scripture exegesis. The fall is described philosophically in terms of epistemology, metaphysics and experimental method, all made to conform to Van Til's own system. This does despite to Paul's statement, "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches." 1 Corinthians 2:13. The Bible is not left free, nor expounded simply, to tell us what constituted the fall of man. The scripture account

has been overridden with ugly philosophical jargon. Van Til has in fact defined the fall as the rejection, not of God and His will, but as the rejection of the peculiar tenets of Kuyperianism.

It would be needlessly tedious to refute in detail Van Til's account of the Kuyperian theory of the fall, given above. In passing the following can be noted: 'Epistemological pluralism', i.e. in this context, God's way of knowing and man's way of knowing, if it ever was 'posited by Eve', is not intrinsically sinful, but simply a recognition that God being infinite and man being finite, their way of knowing must be different and therefore distinguishable, and consequently plural, if such a thing needs to be said. Neither is the 'positing' of 'metaphysical pluralism', again, if Eve ever did it, intrinsically sinful. It is simply saying that because God's being is infinite, and man's being is finite, they are distinguishable, and consequently plural, again if such a thing needs to be said. Also man's use of the 'experimental method' is not intrinsically sinful, as Van Til at the very least implies. It is a confession of man's finiteness, and when used correctly has provided great benefits to mankind.

Further, because Kuyperianism centres the fall in the intellect, and in order to preserve this erroneous doctrine in the face of simple scripture attestation, Arian-type rationalism appears again. Van Til tells us that Eve performed all these strange philosophical feats in the fall, not simply because she disobeyed God, as the Bible says, but because 'it would be worse than folly' (meaning impossible in Van Til's view) for her to have disobeyed, if she had 'thought of (God) as absolute' and 'eternal'. i.e. If her thinking had been correct she would not have disobeyed. To us, and contrary to Van Til, the essence of Eve's sin in the fall, was that she *knew* God's will, expressed in a simple command, and she rejected it. It was Eve's perverse affections and desires, contrary to God's command, that caused the fall, not a faulty concept in the intellect concerning the nature of God. 'The devils believe (in one God) and tremble', but remain devils still.

### **The Contrast of the Simplicity of Scripture**

One wonders whether the sort of thing Van Til has done above is set forth to give the scriptures an appearance of sophistication, so that we might convince worldly philosophers and ourselves, that we are something. It is certain that Paul did not speak in such a way to the Epicureans and Stoic philosophers, Acts 17:18-31. Origen's remark is to the point, "I know full well that either he (anyone) will admire Paul's great conceptions and sentences under a plain and vulgar style, or he will show himself very ridiculous." Cited in An Exposition of Hebrews, by John Owen, Volume 1, page 54, NFCE, 1969.

Though the style is bad, what is worse is that Van Til, to a great extent in setting forth his system, provides insufficient scripture support for his contentions. This fault has been observed by others, and Van Til has acknowledged the validity of such criticism. He admits that he has given occasion for people to think that he is "*speculative or philosophical first and biblical afterwards.*" Towards a Reformed Apologetic, page 24ff. He suggests that the ideal would be to be "*truly biblical first and speculative afterwards*", Ibid. page 28. We are not convinced that this has been achieved.

In teaching Christian theology, simplicity, plainness and Scripture itself should be to the fore. We do not find this in Van Til. It is worth noting also that in Calvin, to whom Van Til

professes such deference, you will search in vain to find anything like Van Til's exposition of the fall. Let us remember Paul's warning, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." 2 Corinthians 11:3.

## VAN TIL AND KANT

Having observed the general philosophical flavour in Van Til's work above, I would like now to look more specifically at the key features of his paradigm, which I believe have a philosophical and not a scriptural source. This of course is contrary to 1 Corinthians 2:13, and Dabney has observed historically the regularity with which scripture truth may be shorn of part of its power by stating it in a currently fashionable philosophical dialect. Having studied and become familiar with Immanuel Kant's philosophy in the past, whilst I was reading certain reviews in the Banner of Truth Magazine, I was alerted to the fact that Van Til's key doctrines have parallels in Kant's philosophy. Indeed some of the terms that Van Til uses come straight out of that philosophy. The meaning Van Til applies to the terms differs from Kant. In no instance however, do I consider that Van Til's meaning is more felicitous than Kant's. In most cases it is clearly less so, and I am not a supporter of Kant. Thus Van Til's system will be seen to be syncretistic, i.e. an attempt to combine Christian doctrine with teachings of the world, a process roundly condemned in the Bible.

In John Owen's words, "That which we account our wisdom and learning may, if too rigorously attended, be our folly: when we think to sharpen the reason of scripture, we may straiten the efficacy of the spirit of it. It is oftentimes more effectual in its own liberty, than when restrained to our methods of arguing; and the weapons of it keener in their own soft breathings, than when sharpened in the forge of Aristotle." 'Life of Owen', in The Works of John Owen, Volume 1, page lvii, Banner of Truth, 1965. In Van Til's case Kant should be read for Aristotle.

### **The Significance of Immanuel Kant to Van Til**

We saw in studying Francis Schaeffer that he laid great stress on the significance of Hegel: "With the coming of Hegel all this (Schaeffer's contention that prior to Hegel everyone, believers and unbelievers alike, believed in the *law of cause* and the *law of contradiction*) changed." The God Who is There, page 19. Well in the case of Van Til the philosopher that impresses is Kant: "It has not been brought out clearly in the history of non-Christian philosophy till recent times that, from its point of view, all predication that is to be meaningful must have its reference point in man as ultimate. But that this is actually the case is now more plain than ever. This is the significance of Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'. It is only in our day that there can be anything like a fully consistent presentation of one system of interpretation over against the other." Introduction to Warfield's Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, pages 23-24.

Some exegesis and comment is required to assist the ordinary reader. A difficulty is immediately introduced. Analysis and criticism of Van Til will require a knowledge of Kant's philosophy and is going to involve philosophical questions. The following warning to Christians should be kept in mind, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." Colossians 2:8. 'Any man' *includes* respected Reformed Christian teachers.

A full discussion here of Kant is not proposed, but sufficient to show the link between him and Van Til, and to demonstrate the weakness of Van Til's criticism of Kant. The main point to be gleaned from the quotation above is the great significance to Van Til of Kant. Van Til's assertion is that Kant's philosophy teaches, what Van Til believes all non-Christian philosophy teaches, but less clearly than Kant, that man is the ultimate reference point and not God. He contends that this is what Kant's *Copernican Revolution* means, and indicates that the clarity he reckons has resulted from this revolution has facilitated Christian opposition, as never before. "For the first time in history the stage is set for a head-on collision." Ibid. Enter the champion Van Til to save us.

### More Confusion

Subtle confusion reigns even here. Van Til sometimes uses the phrase 'ultimate starting point' as an alternative to 'ultimate reference point'. Further he distinguishes the idea of 'ultimate starting point' from the idea of 'immediate starting point', common sense<sup>5</sup> leading him inconsistently to affirm that, "All (Christians and non-Christians) agree that the immediate starting point must be that of our everyday experience and the 'facts' that are most close at hand." *Metaphysics of Apologetics*, page 110.

But a man can have only *one* starting point, and therefore his distinction of an immediate starting point is false. Thus his doctrine of an ultimate starting point is confused and contradictory. How can he say 'All are agreed', when he has rejected all possibility of agreement so frequently? Further, Van Til's definition of the *immediate starting point* at the very least includes, if it is not actually, the empiricists' definition, and as such would not be agreed to by everybody, namely the pure rationalists, who instead would make the immediate starting point the human mind.

### A Proper Perspective of Kant's System

Kant's *Copernican Revolution* is his view of how we know the objects of experience. Instead of focussing upon the object itself, he drew attention to the conditions in the mind of the subject which enable the subject to apprehend the sense data (or *phenomena*) from objects. These conditions in the subject he called *categories* (called by others, including ourselves, as above, *powers of primary judgment*). These categories furnish axiomatic self-evident truths which, as above, govern our apprehension of what Kant called the *manifold* (many and varied) phenomena of sense experience.

This is not to make man *the ultimate reference point*, it is just plain common sense. As Thornwell states, "We believe most fully that there are and must be laws or categories of thought—that there must be conditions in the subject adapting it to know, as well as conditions in the object adapting it to be known." *Writings*, Volume 3, page 119.

The fault in this aspect of Kant's work is not in the concept of the categories as such, but in Kant's refusal to confidently affirm substantial reality to each of the subject (*ego*) and object.

---

<sup>5</sup> Although I have indicated that it is common sense to make the facts of experience the starting point, it should be noted also that the powers of primary judgment in the mind of man itself, as distinct from the world around it, are immediately aroused when exposed to the objective reality of the world.

Again from Thornwell, “The Kantian theory (of the nature of the understanding as subjective and formal).....*though essentially just* (emphasis mine), must be limited and modified.” Ibid. pages 118-119. Specifically, “While Kant might have taught, what we believe he has unanswerably demonstrated, that space and time are native notions of the mind and not generalizations from experience, he would have seen (had he recognized that every intellectual act is *cognitive*, and every act of the understanding *representative*) that, as native notions, they are indispensable conditions of its apprehending the time and space properties of matter, and accorded, consequently, an objective reality to extension, solidity and figure which his theory, in its present form, denies.” Ibid. page 120.

Here is Dabney’s opposition to Kant on this matter: “I cannot (in connection with Kant’s cavilling against the cosmological proof of God’s existence) too early utter my protest against Kant’s theory, that our regulative, intuitive principles of reason are merely suggestive (of subjective and objective reality), [while imperative], and have no objective validity. Were this true, our whole intelligence would be a delusion.” Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 11. In another section Dabney draws attention also to a fault in Kant’s doctrine of the law of cause, in which Kant has attempted to resolve the issue into mere sequence, rather than into the affirmation of necessary power in a cause, for an effect to be produced. Ibid. page 90.

Thus in these matters Kant’s doctrine does not make man the ultimate reference point superior to God. This is not a feature at all of his Copernican Revolution. In passing we might note that Kant has asserted that the moral law in man is unanswerable evidence of God’s existence, and we agree with this. However, as with the subject and object, Kant equivocates over assigning substantial reality to God. The substantial reality of things in themselves (what he terms *noumena*), he asserts cannot be affirmed by human reason. He suggests that by an act of the *pure reason*<sup>6</sup> there is room for *faith* to believe in the noumena, and thus in God. So he thinks he has provided a rational basis for disconnecting reason and faith, which is now a popular modern opinion. These features of Kant’s system are reprehensible, as is his well-known rejection of the cosmological and teleological proofs of God’s existence. It seems to us that the academic fashionableness of the rejection of the theistic proofs, started by Kant, has made it very attractive to Kuyperians. Also, when Kant rationalistically attacks the doctrines of scripture revelation, as he has, then he might be said to be guilty of making man the ultimate reference point superior to God, though we would prefer the simpler term *rationalism* to describe it.

## Van Til and Kant

Thus Van Til’s opposition to Kant’s philosophy as a whole, rather than selectively, and on the grounds that it makes man the ultimate reference point (or more plainly, that it is man-centred), is infelicitous and an oversimplification.

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Kant’s theory the *pure reason* is an aspect of the mind which he distinguishes from what he terms the *logical understanding*. The former respects the *noumena* which he makes doubtful matters of faith. The latter he says is concerned with the more certain application of the categories of the mind to *phenomena*, as discussed above. Because we hold that it is an intrinsic law of thought in the *logical understanding* to affirm the substantial reality of the so-called *noumena*, we have no need of and reject Kant’s suggestion that in the mind there is *pure reason*.

Van Til's other assertion, that 'only in our day' can the Christian and non-Christian systems be set clearly against each other, not because of any virtue in the Christian system, but because of Kant's Copernican Revolution, is again facile. Such a proposition is demolished by the following questions: 'What of Christ's handling of the Sadducees?' And, 'What of Paul's preaching to the Epicureans and Stoics?' Further Church History furnishes plenty of examples of competent Christian opposition to rationalism, as evidenced in the instances of Owen, Thornwell and Dabney given above.

Van Til allows Kant the initiative in defining his (Van Til's) version of the conflict between Christians and non-Christians. If Kant says something, then Van Til has to produce a distorted mirror image of it and then call it Christian. For example, "It is over against this post-Kantian view of the 'limiting concept' that the writer speaks of a Christian limiting concept." Common Grace and the Gospel, Preface, page vi.

By Kantian *limiting concept* he is referring to Kant's distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. Van Til's limiting concept is an attempt to place the boundary of mystery between what can be known and what is not known in a correct Christian (as he calls it) position. But why borrow contentious philosophical concepts and terminology to describe Christian doctrine? The mystery Kant has proposed in his limiting concept, which is partially true only<sup>7</sup>, is quite different from the mysteries associated with God's being and purposes, indicated to us in the scriptures. The distinction Kant was discussing belongs to philosophy, that in Scripture belongs to Christianity. Our clear distinction of philosophy from Christian theology, while allowing for mutual relations and responsibilities, protects us from unjustified philosophical incursions into our religion, and causes us to shun Van Til's system.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kant teaches, and we agree, that men cannot know beings as such, i.e. self, objects or God *in their essences*, yet Kant goes too far when he denies that we can affirm confidently that these beings have substantial reality.

## A Banner of Truth Review

John Child in a review of Van Til: The Theologian, by John Frame, Pilgrim, 1976, hopes that this book “will spur others to appreciate and apply the richness and depth of Van Til’s apologetic and theological thought, so that this Copernican revolution in the realm of Christian thought may be a mighty conquering force in the world of scholarship.” Banner of Truth Magazine, No. 153, page 27, June 1976. Elsewhere in the review we are told that it “May well be said” that “Van Til has done for Christian thought what Kant accomplished for non-Christian thought, giving it a revolutionary awareness of the uniqueness and comprehensiveness of its distinctive principles”, and therefore “as with Kant the ‘Copernican’ radicalism of his contribution must be appreciated in all areas of human thought and life.” Ibid.

The desire for an analogy to be observed between Van Til and Kant is stated as a blatant exhortation! So Van Til’s purpose has been to imitate Kant, with his own version of the Copernican revolution for the benefit of the Christian churches. This cannot be a blessing. I am glad for the information, but we would have to be as blind as Van Til’s supposed *autonomous man* to fall for it. Also, how did the churches get on before Van Til, when they were not aware of ‘the uniqueness and comprehensiveness’ of their ‘distinctive principles’? Please remember too that the words *unique*, *comprehensive*, and *distinctive* in Kuyperian jargon have a different meaning from the traditional Reformed meaning.

## The Key Doctrines of Van Til Listed

The connection with Kant is further confirmed when we see his key doctrines listed. John Child has mentioned some of these heads in another review. The book in this instance is Christians and Sociology, by David Lyon, IVP, 1975, and was examined in the Banner of Truth Magazine, No. 151, pages 29-30, April 1976. There we read of:

1. ‘Presuppositionalist standpoint’
2. ‘Biblical categories’
3. ‘Thorough Biblical epistemology’
4. ‘The myth of academic neutrality’
5. ‘Unless we start off by accepting Biblical authority we cannot have true knowledge and values’

From elsewhere we can add:

6. ‘Autonomous man’
7. ‘Transcendental method’, and
8. ‘Christian limiting concept’ as above.

Also, we have noted before the analogy between the two respecting their rejection of the traditional theistic proofs.

It is indeed strange that Kant, who is ostensibly criticised by Van Til, should turn out to provide so much of the latter’s dialectic. This in itself is destructive of Van Til’s position,

because despite having told us how totally incompetent the non-Christian is, Van Til validates Kant's non-Christian intellect to a considerable extent, by allowing him to provide what Van Til regards as legitimate heads for discussion in his own objectionable theory.

Against all this, as a preliminary assertion, we would say that the Bible assumes God's existence proven from creation and providence and the natural light of reason in man. The Bible itself carries its own marks of a divine origin, sufficient to convince reason, a conviction which is sealed by the Holy Spirit, to some extent amongst the unconverted who hear the gospel, and most thoroughly in the regenerate. Thus to answer vain philosophies and the ordinary man, all we need to do, in the first instance, is to present gospel truth with boldness, meekness and fear, *in its own terms*. It is quite unjustified and paradoxical to superimpose philosophical terms upon the Christian faith.

We recognise the right of man to develop a sound philosophical system to help him in natural things, politically, and to some extent morally. Man's investigation of these subjects is strictly analogous to his pursuit of other disciplines, such as physics, chemistry, engineering medicine and law. Such pursuits are an expression of the freedom granted to man by God. Mistakes are made. But one of the best remedies available to preclude error is the allowance of truly free discourse and moderated debate, as against an exclusive imperious dogmatism.

### **Biblical Presuppositions**

Van Til's presuppositionalism is notorious and unashamed, "These things being as they are it will be our first task in this chapter to show that a consistently Christian apologetic argument, in agreement with its own basic conception of the starting point, *must* (emphasis mine) be by presupposition." Apologetics, page 61.

Schaeffer's definition of *presupposition*, given above on page 20, see footnote No. 4, includes the laws of contradiction and cause as examples, exactly in accord with Kant's Categories. That Van Til has derived the use of the term *presupposition* from Kant is implicit, though perhaps somewhat concealed, in his system. That such an idea forms part of Kant's philosophy is well understood. Stephan Korner states: "That in our thinking about matters of fact we employ Categories and that their application constitutes (this is questionable) objective reality is, it seems, Kant's most important contribution to the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of science—whatever one may think about his claim to have discovered the *presuppositions* (emphasis mine) of *all* objective and scientific knowledge completely." The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophies, page 149, Edited by J. O. Urmson, Hutchinson, 1975.

In his Introduction to Warfield's Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, pages 4 to 37 Van Til provides a thorough explanation of the rationale for his assertion of presuppositionalism. By way of preamble, after making the following unhappy, but perhaps revealing juxtaposition and analogy, "There will always be room, it is said, for a critical analysis of the text of Scripture as there will always be room for a critical analysis of the text of (Kant's) *The Critique of Pure Reason*." Op. cit., page 4, he goes on later to say that, "(Warfield) was aware of the developments in post-Kantian philosophy as well as post-Kantian theology." Ibid., and then remarks in typical Kantian style, "Since Warfield's day the matter of the philosophical presuppositions that underlie the factual discussion of the data of knowledge

has come to stand in the foreground of interest. Great emphasis is being placed upon *the subject's contribution in the knowledge situation* (emphasis mine)" Ibid. pages 4-5.

Without at this stage indicating his approval of this Kantian theory of knowledge, but having nonetheless insinuated it into his discussion, Van Til then shows how this view, articulated in the hands of Alan Richardson in a work titled Christian Apologetics, SCM Press, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948, developed into an affirmation of the "principle of the inseparability of the facts from the principle of interpretation by which they are observed." Ibid. page 6. This assertion Van Til terms "the new, the current or modern principle". Ibid. page 8. Whilst indicating throughout this discussion that he does not accept modernistic humanism or liberal Christianity, Van Til quietly lets us know, what we have already seen, that he in fact is very comfortable with the *modern principle*, eventually stating, "It is true of course that in matters of historical communication we cannot attain unto impartial and impersonal knowledge of facts." Ibid. page 12. In support of this he cites Richardson (from his Christian Apologetics, page 107) who concludes, "we see facts not as they are in themselves, but in the light of our own personal categories of belief and interpretation." Ibid. pages 12-13.

Van Til himself hails this transmutation of the *modern principle* into Christianity, saying of it, "At last there has come to us what is essentially a solution of the age-old problem of authority and reason." Idem. The idea of an impartial perspective, which would be pitted against the *modern principle*, is called a "rationalist theory", Idem. I suppose Van Til had hoped that we did not notice that the *modern principle*, of which he is so enamoured, is blatantly rationalist, as it always has been when propounded in history. It is in fact a Christian duty, not an exercise in rationalism, to bring people back to the facts for what they are in themselves, which, contrary to Van Til, can be perceived by human reason.

Van Til, in this discussion, loudly and at length, condemns as usual the traditional Christian apologetic, because it does not, unlike him, accept the *modern principle* derived from a misuse of Kant's philosophy, "The Aquinas-Butler type of argument assumed that there is an area of 'fact' on the interpretation of which Christians and non-Christians agree." Ibid. page 20. "The compromising character of this position is obvious, etc." Ibid. page 21.

Coming to the question of how to conduct "the argument between those who hold to an infallible Bible and those (who he says) hold to man as the final reference point", Ibid. page 29, he says, as would be expected, that "It cannot be carried on in the traditional way that has been set for both the Romanist and the Protestant by Thomas Aquinas and his school." Idem.

So finally, having quietly insinuated the *modern principle* into his system, then hailed it and loudly condemned the ordinary pathway of reasonable discussion previously engaged in by Christians, Van Til finally grants himself dogmatic licence by affirming, "It is now apparent in what manner we should contend in our day for the philosophical relevance of Scripture. Such philosophical relevance cannot be established unless it be shown that all human predication is intelligible only on the *presupposition* (emphasis mine) of the truth of what the Bible teaches about God, man and the universe." Ibid. page 37. And, "This (apologetic) reasoning (between Christians and non-Christians) will accordingly have to be by way of *presupposition* (emphasis mine)." Ibid. page 39.

## Biblical Categories and Epistemology

In Kant's philosophy, as has been shown, the Categories provide the presuppositions, defined also as primary judgments, necessary for the knowledge of objects. The study of these first truths and the way they are applied to objects is called epistemology. We hold that the powers of primary judgment are a part of man's nature, whether Christian or non-Christian, created by God, enabling man to know in a finite way.

Van Til objects to this: "If man knows certain facts whether or not God knows those facts, as would be the case if the Kantian position were true.....whatever sort of God may remain He is not the supreme interpretative category of human experience." Metaphysics of Apologetics, page 101. The suggestion is that we are to get our categories, and hence our epistemology to know objects, from Scripture, rather than from the light of nature: "The demand of the doctrine of the trinity (a doctrine exclusive to Scripture) when thus conceived is that reality be interpreted in exclusively eternal categories inasmuch as the source of diversity lies in the trinity itself and could never be found in a sense world beyond God." Ibid. page 99. Rushdoony expounds this to mean, "Without the light of Scripture, no fact can be truly known. Not only facts, but all nature and history exist in terms of eternal categories." Van Til, page 42.

Apart from the fact that the assertions of Van Til given above are an exercise in undemonstrated dogmatism, an example of his presuppositionalist licence, it should be noted clearly that the Kantian Categories are to do with the *apprehension* of the facts of reality, they are not in themselves 'interpretative'.

## True Interpretation

*True interpretation* or *perspective*, involving the exercise of *right reason*, is one and the same for unbelievers and believers, and accessible to both. A true perspective, from which reliable interpretations are developed, consists of the exercise of right reason in the *cautious*, *impartial*, and *open-minded* weighing of evidence in order to *establish* truth or to reach *more truth*. If right reason is exercised in this way, then the truth established or the new additional truth arrived at simply becomes *a further fact or facts* in the body of knowledge possessed by man. The *certainty*, *achievability* and *duty* of exercising right reason must be acknowledged by Christians in order *to avoid the gulf of scepticism*, and to protect *the right of private judgment*.

A chosen *theoretical* perspective, which may be right or wrong, must be subjected to verification by the tests of logic and established facts, and can and should be distinguished from valid explanations or interpretations made on sound rational grounds. A *provisional* interpretation *may* either form or involve the use of a *chosen* theoretical perspective. However, this is acceptable only if it is recognised that there is no force of truth in the conclusions reached this way, *until the theory has been validated or verified* by right reason.

Allowing theoretical perspectives to be subject to verification constitutes also a healthy acknowledgment of human fallibility, a fallibility we are susceptible of regardless of whether we are Christian or not. The *differences* amongst Christians, including those of Reformed persuasion, are indicative of fallibility.

Thus it is a duty to truth to *avoid* allowing a chosen theoretical perspective to *determine* our interpretations. True interpretation should be *neutral* or *impartial*, and if validly done is simply productive of more information. Such interpretations include the use of demonstrated natural laws in the natural sciences, the moral law in moral questions, and Scripture in the matters to do with salvation.

### The Categories Considered Further

Categories, properly defined, are *involuntary* intrinsically true laws of thought concreated with the human mind, and are therefore necessarily *unchosen* and fixed. By elision (i.e. an almost imperceptible step for which no logical basis is provided) Van Til has made the term 'Categories' apply also to *chosen* verified or unverified and potentially variable theoretical perspectives developed from *voluntary* discursive reasoning.

Van Til has thus deceptively asserted and would have us believe that a chosen theoretical perspective *has the same inevitable force* over the apprehension of sense data as the true Categories. Because Van Til has not distinguished the *fixed simple dictates* of the Categories from the *variable elaborated postulates* of chosen theoretical perspectives, it therefore must be pointed out as strongly as possible that his use of the term *presupposition* is utterly misleading.

Humans have no more control over the intrinsic operation of the Categories than they do over the beating of their own hearts. Man has power to direct the mind towards objects in experience, but in that process the application of the Categories to the objects is necessary and automatic, it is not a voluntary function. On the other hand, contrary to Van Til, voluntary choice is exercised, with consequent rational responsibility, in the determinations *to use or not use* right reason or *to develop or accept* theoretical perspectives. Further, the same responsible power of choice applies *when men either allow or do not allow* a chosen theoretical perspective to affect their *interpretations* or *explanations* of reality. Men may well be so enthralled by a theoretical perspective that they more or less inevitably allow it to determine beliefs, but this does not occur, as Van Til is teaching, with the same *necessity* with which the Categories operate in the *apprehension* of facts.

In all of this it should be noticed also that it is facile and misleading for Van Til to have overdriven the concept of the Categories, which are the powers of the mind that provide *simple* first truths, and apply it to mean *more elaborate ideas*, i.e. *chosen* theoretical perspectives, concerning God and our religious view. The whole idea of a 'world and life view', prevalent in Kuyperianism, may be fine, however it is not, as they at the very least imply, a principle *necessarily* and *inevitably* governing the apprehension of facts. Their concept of a chosen theoretical perspective inevitably governing facts is a humanistic expression of 'the modern principle' and is dogmatic, authoritarian, and dangerous, because it leaves voluntary choice out of sight, and in the realm of fallible man, including theological interpreters of the Bible, provides a tool for people to say, "Ours is the right and true perspective, yours is not, and you will take the consequences."

These misuses of the concept of the Categories by Van Til, and given the context, the further Kantian undertones in his references to 'interpretation of reality', 'diversity' (which can be

seen as an allusion to Kant's manifold of sense experience), and though not himself affirming the concept, 'sense world', is a syncretistic and infelicitous compound of Kant with Christian teaching, which is clearly unacceptable.

Also, it is an inaccurate demand of Van Til's theoretical perspective to state unfairly that the Kantian doctrine of the Categories necessarily implies also the irrelevant phrase 'whether or not God knows those facts'. Similarly, if Van Til is suggesting, as it appears from the context that he does, that Kant teaches that 'the source of diversity lies.....in a sense world beyond God', then this is inaccurate and unfair also.

Thus despite having given the appearance of objecting to Kant, Van Til in fact has quietly adopted the principle of applying categories straight out of Kant. In his Introduction to Systematic Theology, pages 64-65, in a chapter headed 'Christian Theistic Revelation', coming immediately after three chapters on 'Christian Epistemology', Van Til gives us a list of nine sources of revelation in three groups of three. I presume these are his Categories. In certain respects they are quite novel. Kant had four groups of three, twelve in all.

Categories, and in this context presuppositions, along with epistemology belong to philosophy and not to theology. Van Til, because of his rejection of a limited philosophy discoverable by the light of nature, which includes the categories or laws of thought created with that nature, is led to abuse both philosophy and theology by his strange synthesis of the two.

### **Categories Temporal or Eternal**

Noticing again his adoption of the Kantian terminology (the Categories) improperly for theological purposes, it is an oversimplification for Van Til to assert that there are only two possibilities, either "interpreting reality in exclusively temporal categories or in exclusively eternal categories.....man is placed before a clear alternative and there is no longer a temptation to attempt a solution to those problems by seeking intermixtures of the temporal and eternal." Metaphysics of Apologetics, page 99. This of course is a Kuyperian attempt to obliterate the nature-grace distinction, stated in a philosophical way. Well ours is the third way, which, because it is true, we have chosen with the free exercise of liberty of thought and private judgment, without having to 'succumb to the temptation' to do it, as Van Til has falsely alleged against us. Also we would not accept that 'intermixture' describes our doctrine. How can it be an intermixture when we have distinguished the two? Really it is they who intermix, the temporal and the eternal, by refusing to allow the nature-grace *distinction!* The categories, or laws of thought, inherent in man's nature, are facets of that nature, created by God, and fitted by God to correspond with the temporal and finite characteristics of the creation (reality) about us, when applied in this sphere.

Strictly speaking the categories in man's nature are not only temporal and limited to the sense data of experience in their application, as Kant falsely taught. The law of cause, being an essential element in the cosmological and teleological proofs of God's existence, is applicable to God, who is recognised as the uncaused self-existent First Cause. And the law of substance, whereby we ascribe substantial reality to ourselves, the world and God, is a firm law of thought, despite Kant's attempt to suspend this law in doubt. The same may be said of the moral law written in man's nature by God, i.e. this law has both temporal and eternal

aspects. So the Categories are neither exclusively temporal (Kant's doctrine), nor exclusively eternal (Van Til's doctrine). But again Kant's Categories are in the light of nature, whereas Van Til alleges his are from Scripture. Please note: To avoid any misunderstanding, time and space, which are both conditions of finite existence and primary judgments of the mind, do not apply to the being of God.

In fairness though I gather Van Til means to distinguish the *source* of the categories, rather than their application, when he says that they are eternal. Nonetheless he would certainly reject our suggestion that categories in the light of nature, without reference to Scripture, are applicable either to God or created reality. By temporal he means arising in time in man, by eternal arising in God in eternity. Well the categories in man's nature must of necessity, in their exercise arise in time and from man. To say that these have their ultimate source in God, is but to affirm the obvious. Van Til's expression 'supreme interpretative category' applied by him to God is most injudicious. God is not to be described as a law of thought!

### **Recapitulation**

Christians should be busy to present the truths of revelation in their own terms. As above Christians hold the laws of thought in common with non-Christians, regardless of whether either group knows this or not. It is a fact of existence, without which human society would be impossible. There are philosophers who dispute that the categories are first truths, and there are plenty of other errors in philosophy. But we would simply report these as errors, if it was necessary to do so, without entangling philosophy in theology.

The principal differences between Christians and non-Christians do not respect their intellects, and thus do not require philosophical terms to define them. They are not definable upon the basis of different presuppositions, but upon an accurate exposition of Scripture as it bears on the subject. Such an exposition does recognise the possibility of prejudicial adherence to false doctrines or systems of thought, but does not teach that this is necessarily the case with every man in every respect, and also upholds the reliability of the laws of thought and the capacity of right reason created by God in man's nature.

There are pantheistic overtones in Van Til's epistemological theory. These are to be discussed separately later.

### **The Myth of Academic Neutrality**

This doctrine, which is in fact another way of expressing what Van Til terms the *modern principle*, has been already covered in the discussions above, especially of course in relation to his use of it in his development and justification of presuppositionalism. However, since it is a distinctive principle asserted by Van Til, and listed as such, it will bear further treatment.

The doctrine has been derived, as previously shown from a misuse of Kant's theory of the understanding as subjective and formal, in combination with Van Til's *own* view of some scriptural ideas. Allied to this is the opinion stated above by Child, derived from Van Til, that 'unless we start off by accepting Biblical authority we cannot have true knowledge and values'.

The point being made is that submission to revelation is required for the understanding to function validly. If one is not subject to Christ, it is alleged that inevitably one's view of everything is substantially distorted. Van Til asserts that sinners always distort all facts: "Assuming the truth of Scripture we must hold that the facts speak plainly of God (Romans 1:20, 2:14-15 etc.). But all is yellow to the jaundiced eye. As he speaks of the facts the sinner reports them to himself and others yellow every one. There are no exceptions to this. And it is the facts as reported to himself, that is *as distorted by his own subjective condition* (emphasis mine), which he assumes to be the facts as they really are." Introduction to Warfield's Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, page 20.

As a corollary Van Til denies the distinction usually made between explanation and description, a distinction affirmed by common sense, but contrary to Kuyperian theory. "Description itself is explanation." Common Grace and the Gospel, page 3. Meaning, as above, our perspective (Christian or non-Christian) automatically imposes an explanation upon the facts before us. This is worthy of immediate rejection. Description considers the fact and gives an account of it as it is. Explanation provides additional information by considering the causes leading to the fact, the consequences flowing from it, and its relations to other facts. That the words *fact* and *explanation* are distinguished in language, indicates their legitimate distinctness as ideas. The distinction of facts from explanation is clearly seen also from the observation that facts are used to support true *interpretations, explanations, theories, or perspectives*, and, just as importantly, to disprove false *interpretations, explanations, theories, or perspectives*. That Kuyperianism is forced to deny this legitimate distinction entrenched in human belief and discourse, is a demonstration of its arrogance and folly.

This denial of a common area of facts in the world, distinct from explanation, and understood alike by believers and unbelievers is a serious distortion of the truth. Admittedly the believer, empowered by God through sanctification of the Spirit, as a result of this sanctified perspective and power, gives glory to God from the heart, which an unbeliever cannot do. Because they have a Christian perspective their theoretical explanations, if needs be, may be affected by this. However, apart from this there is no difference with unbelievers. We have the same reasoning faculties and will come to identical conclusions with respect to extensive areas of fact. Van Til *assumes* that theoretical perspective dictates the apprehension of facts. The truth is that a voluntary theoretical perspective, by responsible choice may or may not be allowed to affect or govern the explanations connected with facts. Men are responsible free agents, not robots governed *necessarily* by mechanical perspectives in their minds.

He has thus reasserted the principal blunder of false philosophy, "For ages, philosophers instead of interpreting aright the fact of consciousness in external perception, laid it down as a first principle that the object known was different from the object perceived. This crotchet, accepted without examination and transmitted *in different forms* (emphasis mine), was never questioned until it brought forth the universal fruit of scepticism." Writings of Thornwell, Volume 1, page 220. Van Til's view, as above outrages common sense, what Thornwell calls "a part of the natural faith of mankind; and, practically, nature has always asserted them (the truths of common sense) in defiance of the sophistries of a perverse philosophy." *Ibid.* Page 219. And so we will against Van Til.

At this point, it should be observed also that the *theoretical* judgments of the reason should be distinguished from its *practical* judgments. It is in the *practical* judgments that *sinful*

*perspective* dictates, with adverse effects, and in which *sanctified perspective*, produced by Scripture and regeneration, produces its beneficial effects upon the intellect. In Dabney's words: "On *moral and spiritual* (as distinct from *natural*) subjects the *practical* (as distinct from the *theoretical*) generalisations of the intellect are founded on the dictates of the will. But now, these *practical* judgments of the sinner's understanding, prompted by carnal disposition, contradict certain propositions which are premises to the most important gospel conclusions and precepts. No wonder, then, that such a mind cannot apprehend them as reasonable!" (Emphases mine). Comment upon 1 Corinthians 2:14. Lectures in Systematic Theology, pages 578

The postulate 'that the object known is different from the object perceived' is common, indeed almost universal in humanist academic circles. John Dewey, the pragmatist humanist American philosopher for example also denied the reality or absolute truth of facts apprehended by man. Van Til locks up non-Christians in this prison too. He allows Christians a true apprehension of facts, but even here the Christian is a prisoner, because he is not allowed to distinguish between the facts and the explanations he might make with right reason from his sanctified perspective.

Here is as good a place as any to point out that Christians make mistakes too, both intellectual and moral. Kuyperians need to be told firmly that they are not infallible, which their dogmatic imperiousness implies. They should listen to Cromwell's famous exhortation put at Dunbar to Scottish presbyterians who wished, at the point of the sword, and with the support of Charles the Second as they supposed, to enforce presbyterianism on England: "Consider gentlemen, you may be wrong."

### **Van Til's Doctrine Outrageous**

As above this doctrine outrages common sense. Thornwell, in his Writings, Volume 3, page 84, puts the true position on this matter in a discussion of the various schools of philosophy, when he quotes Aristotle saying: "What *appears* to all, that we affirm *to be*, and he who would subvert this belief will himself assuredly advance nothing deserving of credit."

Paul said to Festus, who was clearly not a Christian, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews I have done no wrong, as thou very well knowest." Acts 25:10. Paul says Festus 'very well knows'. How strongly he affirms the competence of this man's reasoning ability in a matter of great moment. Paul is so sure of Agrippa's expertise upon Jewish questions, despite his being unconverted, that he expresses his happiness to sit under Agrippa's judgment. Paul could not do this if he believed that Agrippa's unconverted perspective would substantially distort matters of fact. See, as above, Acts 26: 2-3. Having heard his case, both Festus and Agrippa testify to Paul's innocence. Van Til is simply astray.

In the courtroom serious judgments concerning our property, liberty and lives can be made. The scriptures enjoin us to submit to unconverted magistrates in this regard, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well." 1 Peter 2:13-14. Christ says to the Pharisees, "It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true." John 8:17.

This means that the unconverted and the converted can find agreement concerning matters of fact in this life, and that the former can truly grasp the same.

According to Van Til's theory the unbeliever can never comprehend the truth, because his unsanctified perspective distorts his perception. This raises a serious question concerning the preaching of Christ. If the unconverted substantially and unavoidably distort the truth received, then this applies to Christ when He is preached to them. If Christ is so inevitably distorted, then He is not really Christ any more, and unbelievers should not be exhorted to believe in such a distortion. Against this it should be said that rational comprehension of the truth is essential to any hope for their salvation, and for their responsibility for rejecting the truth if they do so.

Communication between the converted and unconverted becomes impossible also. Their idea of the facts is one thing, and ours is another. So we always talk about two different things, and nothing bridges the gap. Even the believer, as intimated above, cannot be sure that he has got the facts themselves, because he is told that his own subjective perspective has already interpreted them before he perceives them.

The procedure Van Til recommends for communication between the Christian and non-Christian is impossible on his theory: "Since there is no law on which the two parties to the argument agree they will have to place themselves upon one another's position for the sake of argument." Introduction to Warfield's Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, page 39. The first clause of this sentence and Van Til's thesis outlined above both contradict the second clause.

### **The Threat to Christian Liberty**

The favourite crotchet of false philosophy, supported by Van Til, i.e. 'that the object known is different from the object perceived.....transmitted *in different forms*', has become a tool in various hands to uphold and assert religious and political intolerance and persecution.

In Roman Catholicism the principle that it was 'not necessary to keep faith with heretics' was based on the view that the Roman Catholic perspective was the true one, and that lies even under oath were in fact the truth, if they served the interests of the 'right' perspective, which was theirs.

To justify intolerance, humanism also has been only too eager to assert that 'perspective so governs facts, that facts as such cannot be known independently of perspective'. Again, because they said theirs was the 'right' perspective and that it was inadmissible to contradict them with facts, they then justified persecution of their opponents, because of course they were 'wrong'. Marxism and Nazism both did this, inasmuch as they bothered to give a rational basis for their terrible atrocities.

It is no surprise therefore to find now that the modern Kuypersians have moved on to Christian reconstructionism and theonomy. "In the words of Rushdoony, '*as the new chosen people of God* (emphasis mine), the Christians are commanded to do what Adam in Eden, and Israel in Canaan failed to do.....Man is summoned to create the society that God requires.'" Moses Law for Modern Government: The Intellectual and Sociological Origins of the Christian

Reconstructionist Movement, by J. Ligon Duncan III, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson MS, USA, page 6 on my copy from the Internet, 1994. Theonomy asserts that in this Reconstruction Christians should “seek a civil fulfillment for the peculiarly Mosaic case statutes (i.e. the civil law of Moses).” Ibid. page 10.

This movement is linked to a re-emergent intolerant Presbyterianism which affirms the Solemn League and Covenant of Scotland, which seems to be regarded as analogous to God’s Covenant with Moses and the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. The Solemn League and Covenant includes Intolerance clauses, which are explained more fully in the Acknowledgment of Public Sins and Breaches of the Covenant, see Westminster Confession of Faith, pages 359 and 367. They hold also, according to Chapter XXIII of the Westminster Confession of Faith, that it is the “duty” of the Civil Magistrate “to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that *all* (emphasis mine) blasphemies and heresies be suppressed”. Ibid. page 102. Among the ‘heresies’, according to the Acknowledgment, are included congregational church government and Baptist theology.

This Reconstructionist movement, having proclaimed before that ‘perspective inescapably governs facts’, is thus conveniently insulated from falsification by facts produced by others, who of course have the ‘wrong’ perspective. By this device they have laid the groundwork for the establishment of a theocracy, with intolerance and persecution of those with the ‘wrong’ perspective, if the opportunity presents itself and they choose to do so, with explicit documentary testimony to support them.

In refutation of the possibility of a modern theocracy, sustainable by Scripture, Dabney states:

“When a State can be shown, where there is but one denomination to choose, and that immediately organized by God Himself just then; where there is an assurance of a succession of inspired prophets to keep this denomination on the right track; where the king who is to be at the head of this State Church is supernaturally nominated by God, and guided in his action by an oracle, then we will admit the application of the case (for a theocratic established church).” Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 887.

As Christians who are witnesses to truth and the gospel of peace, the simplest way to destroy all this threatening fire and smoke is to oppose as strongly as possible the false doctrine of Kuyperians such as Van Til, and of humanists, that ‘Description (of facts) is explanation.’ Dabney was right when he said, as the last sentence in his Lectures in Systematic Theology, “Do not suppose that this question (of religious liberty), will never again be practical.” Op. cit. page 887.

### **Autonomous Man**

Kant’s philosophy is clearly the source of this term, which, possessing a certain plausibility in Van Til’s system, is one of the most well known principles in that system. That Kant is the source is frankly conceded by Van Til: “Two creators, one real, the other would-be, stand in mortal combat against one another; the self-contained triune God of Christianity and the homo noumenon, the autonomous man of Immanuel Kant, cannot both be ultimate.” Common Grace and the Gospel, page 5.

Before considering what Kant meant by this term we would immediately question again the propriety of Van Til's procedure of taking a particular philosopher's doctrine to be the denominating description of sinful man. The sinful condition of man and his present relation to his Creator are matters of direct interest to the Christian religion, and are quite satisfactorily dealt with in the Bible. These doctrines should therefore be set forth from Scripture and in Scripture's own terms, and not from philosophy "in the words which man's wisdom teaches."

Kant's doctrine of autonomy in man is partly correct and in part unsatisfactory. Where Kant is talking of the moral law written in man's nature, though he reprehensibly neglects the first table of the law, his view is not really much different from that asserted in Romans 2:14-15, where it says of heathen Gentiles, by way of approval, that they "are a law unto themselves", (*ἑαυτοῖς εἰσὶν νόμος*), showing "the work of the law written in their hearts." At his basic level Kant is just saying that human nature has a self-legislating power in the production of valid moral judgments.

The apostle Paul thoroughly agrees with this, both in the reference given from Romans above and in the following statement, where he affirms the ability in this regard of non-Christians without the Scripture, *to the shame of Christians*: "It is commonly reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." 1 Corinthians 5:1.

Although Kant's recognition of the operation of the moral law in man is largely valid, his view of man's voluntary moral power is clearly rationalistic. He insisted that man could reform himself to perfection, given infinite time, without God's aid, and that we could all expect eventual blessed immortality. Such doctrines are of course completely contrary to Scripture. This is a good reason why Van Til should not have used Kantian terminology or principles at all to expound the Christian faith.

Kant's view of autonomy in his transcendental philosophy, as set forth in his Posthumous Work, is widely astray. Kant disallows, as has been said (see page 32 above), that the ordinary rational functions, which he calls *the logical understanding*, can be applied to any more than the sense data we perceive. Yet he is forced to acknowledge that the mind is naturally impelled to affirm the existence and substantial reality of God, our own minds, and the world, and to recognise the subordination of the world, including ourselves, to God. Kant wishing to ascribe some sort of validity to these irrepressible and powerful ideas, without surrendering his theory, which limits severely the application of ordinary reason, divorces the mind's activity in relation to these ideas from its activity as the logical understanding. Hence his transcendentalism. A principal part of his transcendental theory asserts that the Ideas of God, our real Selves and the real World, along with the Idea of duty are functions of what he terms the *Pure Reason*, which *transcends* the sphere of *the logical understanding*.

Kant defines *autonomy* in this area to be the prescription by the subject (man), to itself, of the *Transcendental Ideas* above the logical understanding. Here he is in error. The *concepts* of God the real self and the real world are not divorced from the ordinary rational processes. Kant's remarks on this subject were injudicious also: he gives the impression that the mind makes God and the World. Hence Van Til's accusation that Kant's autonomous man is a 'would-be Creator'. A full reading of Kant however, indicates that Kant probably did not mean this.

Further, Kant seems to confound the obligation to obey the law with God. His deification of duty in this way is worthy of severe criticism. See Writings of Thornwell, Volume 1, page 373. Thornwell's point, apart from rejecting the obvious error of the deification of duty, is that we should be influenced to do good, not just from a *sense* of duty, as Kant teaches, but by a *love* of duty.

Our position, contrary to both Kant and Van Til, holds that man spontaneously thinking, without special revelation, i.e. Scripture, and by reference to the facts of experience, is able to apprehend validly God's real existence and that of the world and ourselves. We assert that the ordinary rational functions are competent for this task.

In support of this no better statement can be produced at this stage than the following from Dabney's Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 11, which serves not only to refute Kant, but also Van Til, in that it demonstrates absolutely the validity of the principal theistic proof:

"Kant has selected this cosmological argument (for God's existence) as one of his 'antinomies', illustrating the invalidity of the *a priori* reason (i.e. the Categories), when applied beyond empirical things to the transcendental and absolute. His objection to its validity seems to amount to this: That the proposition 'Nothing can exist without a cause outside of itself', cannot be absolute: For if it were, then a cause must be assigned for the First Cause himself (which of course there cannot be).

"But let us give the intuition in more accurate form: 'Nothing can begin to exist, without a cause outside of itself.' Kant's cavil *has now disappeared*, as a moment's consideration will show. The necessary step of the reason from the created things up to a creator, is now *correctly* explained. 'Every effect must have a cause'. True. An effect is an existence or phenomenon *which has a beginning*. Such, obviously, is each *created* thing. Hence it must have proceeded from a cause *which had no beginning*.'" Emphases, except *a priori*, mine.

Thus Kant's transcendentalism is an unnecessary and dangerous process. Our view grants a limited autonomy in man, essential to man's rational and responsible free agency. Van Til, in rejecting even a limited accountable autonomy has therefore endangered the scriptural doctrine of man's rational and responsible free agency.

Of course we reject utterly Kant's suggestion that we are 'self-creators' of the transcendent objects we think, though, as above, it would appear that Kant did not mean the objectionable error that this expression suggests. Such a doctrine is more properly chargeable upon Kant's idealist successors in Germany, of one of whom it is said that he announced of a coming lecture he was to give, that in it God would be made. Doubtless Kant provided some occasioning of this error, and this aspect of his doctrine is most unacceptable.

We might occasionally use the word *autonomous* in a derogatory sense to describe the activity of men when attempting to usurp the place of special revelation and God. However, we do not accept that Van Til's concept of 'autonomous man' is entitled to become a formal principle in a theological system. The reasons for this can be summarised as follows: 1. The one use of the principle in Scripture refers to it as a legitimate feature in man's nature. 2. Even as Kant uses the term, it is partly correct. This highlights again Van Til's oversimplified criticism of Kant. 3. Kant's doctrine has had more or less influence here and there; it is therefore unreasonable to assert that this expression from Kant can be applied

appropriately to all men. 4. Man's rebellion against God can be defined adequately in Scripture terms.

### **Transcendental Method**

We have referred above to that aspect of Kant's transcendentalism whereby he gives some sort of credence to the Ideas of God, the World, Self and Duty. He of course leaves the question of the real existence of God, the world and ourselves in suspense, and divorces the development of these notions from the ordinary rational function.

However, Kant's transcendentalism also includes the consideration of *how* we know the objects of experience on the basis of the a priori conditions (the Categories) in our nature, as distinct from considering the objects themselves. This activity of the rational functions is said to be transcendent because, according to Kant, it transcends objective experience and therefore can be considered separately from the objects.

Thus Kant has hatched a system in which truths can be discovered above the ordinary rational functions, free from the verifying control of the facts of experience. This of course has a familiar ring. Herein is the danger. If some ideas can be valid without meeting the obligations of reason and experience, then others, claimed to be of the same character, may be foisted eagerly upon us. It might be said that the truths that Kant has asserted to be transcendentally valid, happen to be *really* valid. We agree. However, according to us we judge them true because they meet the tests of reason and experience. Kant did not see it this way. We protest that a method such as Kant's, through its implicit paralysis of the judgment of ordinary reason and experience respecting substantial truths, will readily licence streams of error.

Van Til has cast such a slur upon the competency of reason to make judgments concerning knowledge in general and religious truths also, that he, like Kant, is left with little option but to adopt a scheme that transcends ordinary rational processes. I suspect also that he is continuing his mimicry of Kant, whatever the motive for this might be. The similarity between the two is quite apparent.

Van Til has shown some sensitivity to the possible charge that someone might bring with regard to this similarity of method: "Again, we may speak of our method as being transcendental, but if we do we should once more (really!) observe that our meaning of that word is different from the Kantian, or modern, meaning." Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 14. This is unconvincing.

Van Til's definition of his own transcendentalism is: "Unless we are larger than God we cannot reason about Him by any other way, than by a transcendental or circular argument. The refusal to admit the necessity of circular reasoning is itself an evident token of antitheism." Metaphysics of Apologetics, page 16. Also, "Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have (this is blatantly Kantian), in order to be what it is." *Ibid.* The necessity of circular argument is asserted again in Apologetics, page 62, where he says "all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning."

In affirming 'circular reasoning' which *transcends* the ordinary syllogistic logic, Van Til, despite his assurances, is in fact quite Kantian. Kant first told us that ordinary reason was

incompetent to affirm God's existence. Van Til followed suit. Kant first said that the 'foundations the house of human knowledge' are established on a transcendental basis. Van Til followed suit again. By alleging that '*all* reasoning is.....circular' and hence transcends ordinary logic, Van Til is in fact worse than Kant, for Kant affirms a not insignificant, though inadequate, role for the logical understanding.

Van Til's adoption of a transcendental scheme, assertively arguing in a circle avoids the control of the judgment of reason and facts, both of which he has disabled. He thus grants himself a licence to say anything he likes. For example, he has not demonstrated any *connection* between the impossible concept, 'Unless we are larger than God' and the conclusion he purports to draw from it, i.e. the necessity for 'a transcendental or circular argument'. The premise has no meaning, is unconnected with the alleged conclusion, and the conclusion itself is a falsehood. It is arrogant of Van Til to charge us with being antitheistic for not accepting such an incoherent argument!

Our submission to the discipline of slow plodding reason in a line, building a chain of truth from simple axioms and the facts of experience is an evident token of our finite humanity. Transcendental circular assertions sound like aspirations to be as God.

Concerning transcendentalism Dabney warns us: "The frightful licence of dogmatizing to which these schools have proceeded, shows the motive; it is to enjoy an emancipation from the logical obligations of proving dogmas. Do we say to them, Your assertions do not seem to us true, and we disprove them thus and thus: they reply, 'Ah, that is by your plodding, logical understanding; intuitions of the pure reason are not amenable to it; and if you do not see that our opinion is necessarily true, it is only because the reason is less developed in you!'" Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 95. Dabney refutes this theory well, one of his reasons being, "We might practically bring the transcendentalist to reason by saying, first, that they always claim the validity of the logical understanding, when they find it convenient to use it. (The very evasion above stated is a deduction by one step, from false premises!)" Idem. So Van Til too uses logical argument, and not his circular arguments, when it suits him; e.g. If we reject circular reasoning, his false premise, then by one step of logic, he tells us that this is an 'evident token of antitheism'.

Dabney explains that the transcendental position can best be overthrown on the basis that, "the mind sees the truth of a valid deduction by the same faculty, and with equal authority, as an axiom or other first truth—when major and minor premise have a *conclusive relation* (emphasis mine), and that relation is fairly comprehended, the reason sees the conclusion as immediately, as necessarily, as intuitively, as authoritatively, as when it sees a primary truth." Idem.

Thornwell in his Writings, Volume 3, pages 218-219, states of transcendentalism:

"Discarding in nature the safer guidance of experience, and in revelation the safer guidance of a sound interpretation, those who aspire to the higher forms of philosophy are intent upon constructing systems without facts, from principles which have been woven of the stuff that dreams are made of.....As many an alchemist persuaded himself, and perhaps others, that he had found the golden secret of his toil, so these deluded children of the mist eagerly embrace phantoms, which they mistake for the object of their quest, and chuckle in the imagined possession of materials from which they are prepared to fabricate God, worlds and religion. Happy mortals! No longer doomed to the slow discipline of the senses and the slower discipline of the understanding, they carry a laboratory within from which they can extract at will the essence and

quintessence of all possible and real things.....For ourselves, doomed to drudge in a humbler sphere, we are content to know of the external world just what our senses reveal, of the world within us what reflection can bring to light, and of the world above us what the inspiration of the Almighty may vouchsafe to impart.”

Van Til may argue that he is better than this because he says he is subject to Scripture control. But this is no more convincing than Kant alleging that he is subject to the legitimate processes of reason. Van Til’s assertive adoption of transcendentalism and his condemnation of the traditional apologetic, held and taught so well by Dabney and Thornwell, and which unconditionally rejects transcendentalism, causes us to regard with considerable scepticism any reassurances from Van Til respecting this matter.

### **Van Til’s Idealistic Leaning**

While discussing transcendentalism it is appropriate to mention idealism, because both, using Thornwell’s words, relate to an alleged ‘spontaneous development of (elaborated) principles in the mind’. Because Van Til has inappropriately extended the term *Categories* beyond its application to involuntary (i.e. necessary) fixed primary judgments of the reason, to include also voluntary (i.e. chosen) variable theoretical perspectives, he is in fact far more likely to fall into dogmatic idealism than Kant.

Van Til has made the following statement: “It is necessary indeed to point out *constantly* that the idealist system of philosophy is formally *much* better than is the pragmatist system.” Introduction to Systematic Theology, pages 92-93. (Emphases mine). I gather that Van Til is using the term ‘pragmatist’ here loosely to include empiricism. Van Til is thus more opposed to empiricism than to idealism. In passing we can note that empiricists also have gained an impetus from one side of Kant’s philosophy, i.e. from that section which draws attention to the sense data of experience apprehended by the logical understanding.

Van Til finds in idealism an emphasis upon presuppositions in man’s nature, and therefore this phase of philosophy is more agreeable to him. He of course would contend that it is defective in not taking its presuppositions from Scripture. Van Til’s expressed preference for idealism represents another parallel with Kant.

### **A Helpful Explanation of the Various Phases of Philosophy**

The following simple and pithy account of the three alternatives available in philosophy, from Francis Bacon’s Apothegms, cited in the Writings of Thornwell, Volume 1, page 46 may help elucidate the discussions above:

“The empirical philosophers are like ants; they only lay up and use their store. the rationalists (idealists or transcendentalists) are like the spiders; they spin all out of their own bowels. But give me a philosopher who, like the bee, has a middle faculty, gathering from abroad, but digesting that which is gathered by his own virtue.”

Thus the real truth in this matter is to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of the two extremes of empiricism and idealism, avoiding both. The true system is worked up from the light of nature in man reflecting upon the observations of experience. This system of natural

knowledge<sup>8</sup> is consistent with revealed truth necessary unto salvation, but quite distinguishable from it.

It is worth noting how extremes meet. For all his opposition to empiricism, Van Til yet agrees with one of their fundamental doctrines, i.e. the rejection of categories inherent in the light of nature. In the history of philosophy, empiricism has been converted into idealism. Both systems agree in seeking a licence for man to be able to assert what he will; idealists reach this goal by a short step, empiricists take a longer route (see Dabney's Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 92), but eventually arrive at the same position. I have drawn attention to this to further rebut Van Til's assertion that idealism is better than empiricism.

### **Bringing the Indictment Home**

As indicated, Van Til may protest about some of the charges above, but his own choosing of a transcendental method, defined boldly as circular reasoning, has left himself open to the indictment. It might be argued that his espousal of Reformed Christianity will preserve him from the full effects of this error. We are concerned at the offence he has given to our religion by adopting such an antagonistic doctrine to our faith. The plodding logic of human reason, possessed of a limited autonomy, far from being an aspiration to be like God, as he alleges, is an eminent token and admission of its creatureliness. Transcendental assertions, 'It is so', on the other hand are explicit aspirations to be as God. The charges are sustainable because Van Til has made it plain that he is opposed to the doctrines asserted by the teachers cited above, doctrines which have enabled them to criticise transcendentalism so effectively.

### **Recapitulation**

So to review at this point. We see considerable borrowing of Kantian terminology, with his own redefinitions, in the heads of Van Til's system. Thus there is an unhealthy use of 'the words that man's wisdom teaches' in his scheme, which is an attempt to unite Kant's philosophical terminology with Reformed Theology. Also we cannot protest too strongly against the mystical dogmatic licence that Van Til has granted to himself by adopting a 'transcendental method'. In the process it becomes difficult to distinguish the errors in Kant's philosophy from its truthful aspects. This does not aid the defence of Christianity from rationalism. Rather, as Sadducee leaven it will 'shear God's Word of part of its power over the soul' and become a vehicle for the introduction of frank error into the churches.

---

<sup>8</sup> The following references are recommended as providing a safe and sound introduction to philosophy, its various forms and controversies:

1. Writings of Thornwell, Volume 3, pages 79-86.
2. Life and Letters of Thornwell, pages 535-545 and 412-413.
3. Lectures in Systematic Theology, by Dabney, pages 78-119.

## PANTHEISTIC LEAVEN

### Temporal Categories and God's Transcendence

Van Til's rejection of temporal categories, see page 42 above, and the consequent principle, asserted by Rushdoony for Van Til, that all finite things 'exist in terms of eternal categories', see page 40 above, have a pantheistic ring about them.

Finite things must *exist* in terms of temporal categories, because such things are temporal. To say they *exist* in terms of eternal categories, temporal categories having been rejected, is to merge them into the eternal, which is pantheism.

Categories, as above, are the laws of belief implanted in our minds by God. When applied by us to the objects of experience, these categories, which thus enable us to know those objects, must be temporal, because existing in us they are operating in time. That we might know existing *finite* objects, the categories correspond to the conditions under which these objects exist, and those very conditions, to which the categories correspond, are temporal. Thus as the categories arise in us and are applied to God, or to the objects of finite reality, and as they correspond to the conditions under which *finite* objects exist, they are temporal. To suggest otherwise, as Van Til has done, is absurd.

Our assertion that the categories in our minds and the conditions of objective existence function and subsist temporally does not repudiate God as Creator, nor His immanence, as Van Til would imply. Rather God's transcendence<sup>9</sup> guarantees our assertion. Van Til's attack on temporal categories inevitably clouds God's transcendence. In doing so Van Til becomes pantheistic.

### A Startling Remark

As a corollary of rejecting categories arising in reason, independently of Scripture, reason itself is in effect effaced. For these categories are of the essence of our rational faculty. With incoherent contradiction, elsewhere Van Til affirms, "that God has planted such laws of belief into our very being." Apologetics, page 48. He goes on to say that the 'sense of deity' is such a law; however, this is disputable.

Having invalidated rational function in its own right, and thus for all practical purposes obliterated human reason as a competent faculty and source of valid beliefs, it is consistent for Van Til to make the following startling remark: "We must avoid the idea that human reason exists as a known and definable entity apart from God so that we can begin from it as from an ultimate starting point." Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 21, in his first chapter on 'Christian Epistemology'.

---

<sup>9</sup> This doctrine is defined as follows: "God is transcendent, that is he is a distinct person, separate from the world and all other persons." Evangelical Theology, by A .A. Hodge, page 16, Banner of Truth, 1976

On the face of it Van Til makes the first clause: ‘We must avoid etc.’ the premise for his second clause: ‘so that we can begin etc.’ It is therefore reasonable to assume that Van Til *asserts* the first clause as such. Further, as usual, because of his *assumed* transcendental licence, he has provided no *evidence*, i.e. facts in conjunction with syllogistic logic, to *demonstrate* his assertion. Dabney’s observation given above can be repeated here also: ‘We might practically bring the transcendentalist to reason by saying, first, that they always claim the validity of the logical understanding (i.e. the Aristotelian syllogism), when they find it convenient to use it. (The very [argument] above stated is a deduction by one step, from false premises!)’

### **God’s Transcendence Out of Sight**

Van Til should have realised here, as he should have also in his rejection of temporal categories, that he is at the very least clouding the doctrine of God’s transcendence. His failure to state the relation of his assertions to God’s transcendence has two effects:

1. The impression is created that those who teach the separateness of the creature from the Creator are practical atheists or worse.
2. The inevitable undermining of his thesis, produced by the doctrine of God’s transcendence is kept out of sight.

The price Van Til pays for this vagueness is the introduction into his system of the leaven of pantheism.

### **A Possible Mitigated Sense**

It may be that Van Til had meant just to press the Kuyperian postulate that any valid understanding of human reason requires a regenerative acknowledgment that God created it. However, that is not the plain meaning of his words. His remarks are strong and at the very least extremely injudicious. He talks of reason as ‘a known and definable entity’. He did not have to use such language to express what could have been a mitigated, but nonetheless Kuyperian postulate still.

### **The Mitigated Sense Unsatisfactory**

The mitigated sense, as has been intimated, because it is Kuyperian, is unsatisfactory. For God’s creation of reason is a distinct fact about reason, and other things about reason can be studied and known, even if its creatureliness is not in view. In fact the finiteness of man’s nature virtually requires attention to one thing at a time. We retort most strongly that reason’s creatureliness and God’s transcendence guarantee that reason *is* a ‘known and definable entity apart from God’, so that it can be inspected and studied as such.

So even if Van Til would not have God merged into human reason, which his plain language has suggested, yet he would have the ‘regenerate consciousness of God’ so merged into reason, and into all other facts too, incidentally, that reason is lost as a ‘known and definable

entity'. Though this is not frankly pantheistic, it is heading that way; for Van Til is merging difference in indifference, and including the concept of God in this process of obscuring confusion.

### **Reason as an Ultimate Starting Point**

Some further observations need to be made about his second clause which talks of reason being 'an ultimate starting point'. This jargonistic expression has been noticed above (see page 42).

Firstly, it is obvious that reason needs to be a 'known and definable entity apart from God' to be started from at all.

Secondly, Van Til would charge any position not in agreement with him, as it respects human reason, with making reason 'an ultimate starting point'. Careful reflection upon Van Til's imprecision here produces some interesting results.

### **Classifying Views of the Relation of Reason to God**

We might list three types of view that Van Til would so charge:

1. Our position, which recognises a legitimate extensive but yet limited role for reason, outside direct Scripture control. This we do on the well-settled distinction of the light of nature from the light of special revelation.
2. Rationalism which rejects or judgmentally overrides special revelation on the one hand, and proclaims on the other hand, in one way or another, that reason is competent to perform the tasks of special revelation, i.e. the redemption of mankind. Rationalism of this sort may still retain the idea of a transcendent Creator. Kant's system is more or less of this variety.
3. Rationalism which so elevates reason that it not only rejects God's revelation, but also asserts that reason is God absolutely, thus attempting to destroy the transcendent Creator Himself. This type of rationalism was espoused by the German absolutists Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and of course is a variety of pantheism.

From this three-fold classification, which cannot be made by Van Til, because it depends upon the nature-grace concept, it is obvious that:

1. To make reason a 'known and definable entity apart from God' is not necessarily to make it *ultimate*.
2. In making reason an 'ultimate starting point' in the Kantian sense, it yet *remains correct* for Kant to assert that reason is a 'known and definable entity apart from God'.

These two facts alone demonstrate the hopeless confusion in both clauses of Van Til's assertion.

However we need not stay here. For it is notorious that the absolute pantheistic rationalists, who make reason *most* ultimate, do exactly what Van Til recommends, i.e. reject reason as a 'known and definable entity apart from God'.

Van Til's landing in with the absolutist pantheists is inevitable, for he clearly rejects the Thomist view (ours), and the Kantian, so all he is left with is the third option, pantheism. We have no reason to charge Van Til with materialistic atheism or a tendency towards it, which is the other possibility.

In passing we can notice that, apart from his rationalism, Kant in recognising some valid though too limited function for the light of nature, is better than Van Til. Kant is also to be commended for his opposition to the claimed metaphysical knowledge of the pantheistic absolute rationalists. See Writings of Thornwell, Volume 3, page 86.

### **Pantheism and the Destruction of Reason**

As above, for all practical purposes, Van Til's hypothesis destroys reason as a definable entity. This is implicit in his rejection of temporal categories, and in his rejection of reason's power of independent judgment essential to its responsible free agency. Van Til might reply to this charge: "No, I do not say this. All I want to say is that man must think God's thoughts after Him." To this we say, "Yes, but man needs an instrument which thinks these thoughts for himself." This instrument is his reasoning faculty, which is competent for extensive, though finite tasks.

Van Til's destruction of reason bears further examination here because of its relation to pantheism. If human nature has no categories of its own, created by God, and distinct and definable apart from Him, then it has no rational faculty. Thus human reason is destroyed. But humans think. On Van Til's hypothesis all that is left is God performing the tasks of human reason. This is to fuse the finite with the infinite, which is pantheism and nonsense.

Thornwell suggests, and we might well mark it, that pantheism, in *any* of its various forms, is always associated with the destruction of reason. "We affirm finally that every form in which the philosophy of the Absolute ever has been, and, we venture to say, ever can be, proposed, necessarily *leads to nihilism*—the absolute annihilation of the possibility of knowledge." Ibid. page 150. This is because implicit in pantheism is the denial of the law of contradiction, which distinguishes things that are different.

Van Til's approach of course differs from that of the German pantheistic absolutists, though it leads to the same result. Van Til attempts in God's name to deny the existence of reason as an entity apart from God, and so interferes with the doctrine of a transcendent Creator. The German pantheists, in the name of reason, attempted to destroy the concept of a transcendent Creator, but in the process destroyed reason, because they denied the law of contradiction, essential to coherent rational function.

## Van Til's Explicit Rejection of the Law of Contradiction

As above, this law enables the distinction of a transcendent Creator from the creation and affirms the distinctness of individual created objects. In an interview of Van Til, reported in Christianity Today, Volume XXII, No. 6, December 1977, pages 18-22, Van Til clearly rejects this law. He remarked on its formulation by Aristotle, and caricatured it as an "eternally static turnpike in the sky", which he explained to mean, when asked, "that there is no way to get on it." This at the very least verifies our charge that Van Til's theory vitiates true Christianity by introducing into it the leaven of pantheism.

Again we have to note that elsewhere, in typically incoherent fashion, Van Til has tried to affirm a law of contradiction, but valid only in the regenerate consciousness. See Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 11.

## Recapitulation

Some important matters have been raised in considering Van Til's thesis. These are:

1. God's transcendence guarantees that there are temporal categories. Rejection of temporal categories introduces the leaven of pantheism.
2. The nature-grace distinction, enabling a precise classification of the various ways of relating reason to God, overthrows Van Til's view of the subject.
3. Van Til's virtual destruction of reason is a firm link with pantheism.
4. His explicit rejection of the law of contradiction is also pantheistic.

Because the pantheistic leaven is there, great care should be exercised in handling Van Til's system.

## The Existence of God and the Creation

That finite beings, subject to the conditions of time and space, are created, is evident from their mutability. Their existence involves continuous manifold *changes* in their material, and where possessed, their spiritual natures. In other words, they are *thoroughly* contingent, or dependent, upon the law of cause (and effect), which operates in both an extrinsic fashion upon them, and intrinsically within. The law of cause (and effect) demands that a *cause is responsible for every change*. At the most, finite beings, even if rational and therefore free, can do no more than *affect* or *induce* such changes to a *limited* extent, not *absolutely*, and they are therefore not *self-existent*. In fact the limited capacity of finite beings to affect or induce changes involving their existence further demonstrates their contingency, because to affect or induce such changes requires change itself to *produce* such a result. True self-existence ineffably does not undergo change in sustaining itself. Finite beings, lacking the *power of self-existence*, must have been *brought* into existence *by something else*. In other words, because they were *brought* into existence, they had a beginning. Because they had a

*beginning*, and were not there before they began, they *could not be an agent* that caused their beginning. It is *necessary* therefore to invoke an immutable self-existent independent Cause, i.e. God, to explain the *beginning*, and therefore the existence of finite beings, contingent or dependent, upon the law of cause and effect. This is why God's being is said to be *necessary*. This constitutes the *cosmological* proof of God's existence.

The *teleological* proof, also taking its lead from the *law of cause*, focusses upon the observation of *irreducible magnificent ordered complexity* in the beings which constitute finite existence. These beings are seen to be incredibly and intricately complex when observed properly, and their complexities are *interrelated* and *interdependent*, and therefore *irreducible*, i.e. they cannot have arisen one at a time, but in innumerable instances need to be there together to enable one another to function. A Cause with adequate power, which because of the *magnificence* of the creation must include infinite intelligence, is needed to explain these observations. The irreducibility evident amongst these beings and their characteristics, argues irrevocably against their gradual development or evolution.

An additional observation that can be made from these facts is that the *continuing* existence of contingent beings proves that there is a Providence, i.e. it is just as *necessary* to invoke a self-existent independent Being to explain the continuing existence of contingent beings, sustaining them and the continuous manifold changes to which they are subject, as it is to explain the commencement or *beginning* of those beings. Creation explains their beginning, Providence explains their continuance. "God.....holds our soul in life and suffers not our feet to be moved." Psalm 66:8-9.

With the faculty of reason which God has given to us, He is susceptible of knowledge by us. We affirm His existence, as above, by the law of cause, in explaining the existence of the changeable and therefore contingent creation, which is plainly manifest to our observation. In Scripture God makes Himself known by explicit testimony, and, if we believe in Him, by filial fellowship.

Creaturely existence is, as above, changeable and therefore contingent. The objects of this finite existence are also susceptible of knowledge by us through our rational processes.

We acknowledge also that the sin of man has adversely affected the creation, though because of God's gracious purpose of redemption through Christ, the situation is not without hope:

"For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope. Because the creature itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God." Romans 8:19-21.

The statements above are the straightforward doctrines of historic Christianity, and as such avoid the danger of the leaven of pantheism evident in Van Til's doctrine of all finite things 'existing in terms of eternal categories'.

## CALVIN'S POSITION

Van Til seems assured that he is following in Calvin's footsteps and that the Princeton theologians, and others holding their doctrine, have fallen aside in their Calvinism on the question at issue, i.e. the competence of the fallen man's intellect.

Van Til believes however that development from Calvin's position is required, and considers that he is providing this development, "it is upon the development of these teachings of Calvin that we must depend for a consistent Christian epistemology." Metaphysics of Apologetics, page 88. A *development* is required for you will look in vain in Calvin for the philosophical jargon and concepts of Van Til. At the same time we must examine the question of whether it is really Calvin's doctrine that Van Til starts from.

One should not be daunted by a claim that Calvin is on an opponent's side, and the consequent adverse reflection cast upon our Reformed orthodoxy. In at least one other theological debate, I instance that concerning the imputation of original sin, there has been dispute about whose side the great Protestant theologian was on. The question, 'Is modern Amsterdam or old Princeton right?' was obviously not put to Calvin. A careful exegesis is required to settle this question.

The following quotes from Calvin are provided as support for our position against Kuyperianism:

"The distinction is, that we have one kind of intelligence of earthly things, and another of heavenly things. By earthly things, I mean those which relate, not to God and the kingdom, to true righteousness and blessedness, but have some connection with the present life, and are, in a manner, confined within its boundaries. By heavenly things I mean the true knowledge of God, the method of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom." Institutes, Book II, 2:13.

"Since, however, man's efforts are not always so utterly fruitless as not to lead to some result, especially when his attention is directed to inferior objects. Nay even with regard to superior objects, though he is more careless in investigating them, he makes some little progress." *Idem*.

### **Van Til and the Heavenly-Earthly Distinction in Calvin**

It helps us to note that what Calvin says in these quotations is not to Van Til's liking, for his comments upon them are: "Even Calvin, though by his doctrine of 'common grace' he was in a much better position to do justice to the knowledge of non-Christian science without succumbing to it than others were, did not bring out with sufficient clearness at all times (as good Kuyperians would never fail to do of course) that the natural man is as a blind as a mole with respect to natural things as well as with respect to spiritual things.....The mechanical separation between earthly things so often found has almost disappeared from Calvin's writings. Yet on occasion when he is trying hard to bring specific content into the notion that the natural man has certain knowledge with respect to the universe which is good *as far as it goes*, he falls back on the old distinction without criticizing it." Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 82. And, "When, however, this distinction, which Calvin in common with

many others makes in this connection, is read in context, it will be seen that Calvin by no means countenances the notion that the natural man does know even the physical world truly.” Idem.

Well it is just too bad for Van Til. It is he who is ‘trying hard’, not John Calvin. Van Til is ‘trying hard’ to make Calvin fit into his system, when Calvin’s actual position is utterly fatal to it. Van Til has to ‘try hard’ to fit him into Kuyperianism, in his attempt to preserve the flaunted Reformed orthodoxy of his system. If Calvin is against him, and were he to admit this frankly, as he ought to do, then he knows his reputation for genuine Calvinism is lost.

### **Answers to Van Til**

With ample reference to Calvin’s context, as Van Til suggests, in answer to his attempt to incorporate Calvin on his side, I would state:

1. The introduction of the concept of ‘common grace’ as a preservative from ‘succumbing’ to ‘non-Christian science’ by Van Til is not relevant. Van Til’s use of it becomes rather a smokescreen behind which he would effectively invalidate the knowledge of the natural man with respect to everything, characterising him as being ‘blind as a mole’. That God bestows the intellectual gifts, which is what the doctrine of common grace indicates, makes no difference to the fact that the heathen have got the gifts and thus know what they are talking about when they exercise them. Calvin tells us that the heathen were aware that these gifts came from God:

“But shall we deem anything to be noble and praiseworthy, without tracing it to the hand of God? Far from us be such ingratitude; an ingratitude not chargeable even on heathen poets, who acknowledged that philosophy and laws, and all useful arts, were the inventions of the gods.” Institutes, Book II, 2:15.

This is clearly in the context and refutes Kuyperianism in general and Van Til in particular.

2. Calvin asks rhetorically:

“Shall we say that the philosophers, in their exquisite researches and skillful description of nature, were blind?” Idem.

Van Til answers, ‘Yes, as blind as a mole.’

3. Van Til says that Calvin does not ‘countenance the notion that the natural man does know even the physical world truly’. This is simply false. Calvin states:

“Therefore since it is manifest that the men whom the Scriptures term natural, are so acute and clear-sighted in the investigation of inferior things, their example should teach us how many gifts the Lord has left in the possession of human nature, notwithstanding of its having been despoiled of the true good.” Idem.

4. Van Til’s remarks that Calvin is ‘trying hard’ and ‘falls back on the old distinction’, which is fatal to Kuyperianism, are eisegesis not exegesis. On reading Calvin on these matters there is no indication whatsoever that he is struggling to express himself other than in plain simple

terms. He has not had to resort to Thomism because he can't find an adequate way to teach Kuyperianism. The distinction appears perfectly natural and unstrained in Calvin, for one simple reason, it is the truth. As usual Van Til has made an assertion without providing credible evidence to sustain it.

5. For Van Til to call the heavenly-earthly distinction, so clearly affirmed by Calvin, 'mechanical' is a slur. We believe in mutual responsibilities between the two spheres, with the subordination of the latter to the former. Van Til could wish that the old distinction has 'almost disappeared' from Calvin. Well that is simply too bad for Van Til, because Calvin believed it and taught it. Van Til does not have Calvin on his side in this matter.

6. Among the 'many others' in league with Calvin making 'the old distinction' Thomas Aquinas must be one. Van Til's near orthodox comment concerning the natural man's knowledge that it is 'good *as far as it goes*', sounds quite Thomist too.

### **The Necessity of Heavenly Wisdom**

Calvin does not teach, and neither do we, that man is all very well without saving knowledge, and provides the following caveat:

"Lest any one, however, should imagine a man to be very happy merely because, with reference to the elements of this world, he has been endued with great talents for the investigation of truth, we ought to add, that the whole power of the intellect thus bestowed is, in the sight of God, fleeting and vain, whenever it is not based on a solid foundation of truth." Institutes, Book II, 2:16.

The distinction of the 'elements of this world' is reaffirmed, as well as, contrary to Kuyperianism, 'great talents' of intellect, but being 'despoiled of the true good', 'the solid foundation of truth' in the gospel, all is 'fleeting and vain'. The people are not saved, and are lost at the last, if God does not interpose with his grace and the gift of heavenly wisdom.

### **Recapitulation**

Thus concerning the ability of the light of nature, we have seen Calvin affirm the two spheres, heavenly and earthly and the successful activity of the worldly in the latter, and what he calls their making 'some little progress' in the former. This Calvin does without the complex wire-drawn qualifications, concerning the natural man's intellect, introduced by Van Til. Calvin says that *both* Christians and non-Christians can trace God's hand in His works by a common method, see page 23 above. This method is none other than the traditional a posteriori (empirical) cosmological and teleological proofs, not 'a presuppositional assertion upon which all human predication depends', to use Van Til's style.

### **Further Points from Calvin**

Calvin asserts the agreement between men, without any distinction of a Kuyperian sort, regarding moral judgments, and this is scriptural:

“Hence it is that every individual understands how human societies must be regulated by laws, and is also able to comprehend the principles of those laws.” Institutes, Book II, 2:13.

Here there is no invalidation of their understandings, just the simple ‘able to comprehend’. So Calvin goes on:

“Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of nature displayed in them should remind us that the human mind, however much fallen from its original integrity, is still adorned with admirable gifts from its Creator.” Ibid. Book II, 2:14. The liberal arts “are bestowed indiscriminately on the good and the bad.” Ibid. Book II, 2:15.

And in confirmation of this point:

“From this passage (Titus: 1:12) we may infer that those persons are superstitious, who do not venture to borrow anything from heathen authors. All truth is from God; and consequently, if wicked men have said anything that is true and just, we ought not to reject it; for it has come from God. Besides all things are of God; and, therefore, why should it not be lawful to dedicate to his glory everything that can be properly employed for such a purpose? But on this subject the reader may consult Basil’s discourse *pros tous neous, hopo an ex hell. k. t. l.*” Commentary on Titus, in Calvin’s Commentaries, Ephesians to Jude, pages 2274-2275, AP&A.

### **Contradiction and Subtlety Again**

Admittedly Van Til states elsewhere that, “the philosophic and theological efforts of non-Christians contribute to the true state of affairs”, and, “even non-Christian thinkers can do constructive work.” Toward a Reformed Apologetic, page 11. But he will *not* say that this is because they reason validly, as Calvin certainly does. The ‘reason’ Van Til puts forward to support these assertions, without any demonstrated logical connection, as usual, is that “the world is what Christians say it is and it is not what fallen men say it is.” Idem. This is either plain contradiction or excessive intangible subtlety. Rushdoony says in one sentence, on the same theme, “Thus the natural man does have knowledge (meaning knowledge in general).....yet the natural man has no knowledge.” Van Til, page 20.

### **Van Til Misinterprets Calvin**

The following consists of a misleading use of Calvin made by Van Til: “Whatever insight man is to have into this pattern of the activity of God he must look at all his objects of research in the light of Scripture. ‘If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture’ (Calvin, Institutes, Book I, 6:2).” Apologetics, page 67.

In the quotation Van Til gives, Calvin is not talking about the relating of our Christian position to ‘all’ our ‘objects of research’, Van Til meaning by these, “All of finite existence, natural and redemptive.” Idem. Calvin is talking about ‘true religion’, and in the context shows that he means by this Scripture’s office “to teach the method of reconciliation between God and man”, Op. cit., and to provide “marks and tokens to distinguish the only wise and true God, considered as the creator and Governor of the world.” Idem.

I doubt not that the Christian should relate all he does to God's purpose, that he might do all to the glory of God, and that Calvin teaches this. But I cannot accept what Van Til teaches, that God's Word, believingly received, is necessary to authenticate our rational functions, to the extent that we can have no insight into God's purpose respecting the natural sphere without it. Calvin does not teach that. That this is really what Van Til means is established in his context: "Scripture presents itself as being the only light in terms of which the truth about facts and their relations can be discovered.....So we cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns its proper function from Scripture." Ibid. page 67. Van Til at least admits that these remarks of his are bald. Ibid. page 68.

As to subjecting the pronouncements of Scripture to the scrutiny of reason, I answer, as above, "Come let us reason together." Isaiah 1:18. As to learning how to reason properly from Scripture, I answer from Calvin, 'Shall we deny the possession of intellect to those (the heathen philosophers) who drew up rules for discourse, and taught us to speak in accordance with reason?'" Institutes, Book II, 2:15.

Thus the key to Calvin's position on man's knowledge, and the place of Scripture, is found in the heavenly-earthly distinction. This is plain from what has been quoted; however it is worth confirming further that he does teach a doctrine of 'knowledge unto salvation', implicit in this distinction, and also deprecated by Van Til. "Not in vain, therefore, has he *added* (emphasis mine) the light of his word in order that he might make himself *known unto salvation* (emphasis mine), and bestowed the privilege on those whom he was pleased to bring into nearer and more familiar relation to himself." Institutes, Book I, 6:1.

Van Til is well aware that the traditional view is to distinguish natural and saving knowledge, as appears from his citation of Alan Richardson's Christian Apologetics, pages 110-111. The traditional view, which we hold in common with Calvin, and which these two oppose, is described as follows: "'But this natural knowledge of God, it was held, does not give to man all that he needs to know; it is not *saving* knowledge, and it cannot satisfy the craving of the human soul for that measure of truth (found in Scripture) which is beyond the natural capacity of the human mind.'" Introduction to Warfield's Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, page 11.

Van Til's opposition to the distinction is made clear in his Apologetics, page 27, where he says, "The Roman Catholic says that philosophy and science make certain assertions about God on the basis of the revelation of God in nature, and adds that theology can make *additional* (emphasis mine) assertions about God on the basis of the revelation of God in Scripture and tradition. Many Protestants, unfortunately, also hold to this view (see e.g. Bishop Butler's Analogy and the many books later written in dependence upon it)." (It should be noted that Protestants do not accept tradition as a source of authority). At most Van Til allows "a measure of truth" in the distinction, but states nonetheless that he "cannot accept it." Idem.

Well Calvin too recognises that the word was 'added' that God might be 'known unto salvation'. Those who hold to the Westminster Confession (see its Chapter I) should note Van Til's attitude to this point. Calvin and the Westminster divines lived before Butler and held the distinction objected to by Van Til. These facts should be appreciated.

## INNATE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Some theologians have affirmed what is called an *innate* knowledge of God, i.e. the idea of God is a primary truth written in our nature. Calvin is considered to be one of these theologians, for he says:

“That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that he is their maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.” Institutes, Book I, 3:1.

Calvin made major original breakthroughs in the discipline of theology, including the elucidation of the historico-grammatical hermeneutic principle, the demonstration of the three-fold office of Christ the Mediator, as Prophet, Priest and King, the synthesis of the Augustinian doctrine of grace with justification by faith, and the setting forth of the regulative principle of Scripture with respect to church government. His Commentaries on the Bible were incomparable at the time of their production, and all good commentaries since have relied on this work he did as an expositor. His Institutes of the Christian Religion were the first comprehensive, extensive and systematic explanation of the Christian faith as God’s way of salvation by grace for fallen man. It is unreasonable to expect infallibility of him however, though it is remarkable that relatively little of what he has said has proved to be in need of correction. Having said this, it should be made clear that Calvin *did not address the question* of whether there is a knowledge of God which is strictly innate, as distinct from whether this knowledge is gained by necessary rational inference close to man’s nature. It is therefore perhaps unfair to push Calvin’s statement above to mean an unequivocal or explicit affirmation of the doctrine of innate knowledge of God, in the sense that it is a primary truth written in our nature.

Before proceeding further it should be noted that Calvin, and other theologians who are known to hold the doctrine of innate knowledge of God explicitly, consider that it is all men, not just Christians who possess this knowledge. So irrespective of the merits or otherwise of this view, it is clear that such theologians ascribe unequivocally a competence to the natural man’s reason respecting his knowledge of God.

The teaching of innate knowledge of God is linked to the so-called ontological proof discussed earlier, in that the ontological proof alleges an argument constructed purely upon rational principles in the mind, without reference to empirical data. One would have expected that Calvin was familiar with Anselm’s statement of the ontological proof, and that if he had supported it, then Van Til would have pointed this out. To my knowledge Calvin has given no such affirmation to Anselm’s doctrine on this matter. We would acknowledge however, that an absence of such testimony is not absolute proof that Calvin did not support it.

The doctrine of innate knowledge may be asserted also on the basis of man’s nature as religious; the law being written in man’s heart, including duty towards God, leads man to worship God. In John Gill’s words:

“There are some indeed among us, (doubtless he is referring to Locke), who deny that there are any innate ideas in the minds of men, and particularly concerning God: but to such writers and reasoners I pay but little regard; when the inspired apostle assures us, that even the gentiles, destitute of the law of Moses, have ‘the work of the law written in their hearts’, Romans 2:15, which as it regards duty to God, as well as man, necessarily supposes the knowledge of him; as well as of the difference between good and evil, as founded upon his nature and will: and though this light of nature is not sufficient to lead men in their present state, to a true spiritual and saving knowledge of God; yet it furnishes them with such a sense of him, as puts them upon seeking him; ‘if haply they may feel and grope after him and find him’, Acts 17:27. These notices of a divine Being do not flow from the previous instructions of parents and others; but from a natural instinct; at the most they are only drawn forth by instruction and teaching.” A Body of Divinity, page 4, Sovereign Grace, 1971

## A Fine Distinction

There is a fine distinction here, i.e. between those who hold that the idea ‘there is a God’ is inherent in man’s nature, and those who hold that this idea is drawn forth by inference from experience, both of oneself and of the things round about. Stephen Charnock has noticed this fine divergence of opinion: “It (the natural and innate knowledge of God) is natural, though some think it *not a principle writ in the heart of man*; it is so natural that every man is born with a restless instinct to be of some kind of religion or other, which *implies* some object of religion.” The Existence and Attributes of God, Volume 1, page 35. (Emphases mine).

In John Owen’s words: “Do we not all know that our minds are inclined by indwelling conscience to that simple acknowledgment—God is—*and that to deny this would be to deny our own rationality*.....All of human experience testifies that the human mind acquiesces uniformly to this truth, be it truly innate, or *be it arrived at by some power of logic which can argue so swiftly from these unarguable premises* (the judgments of conscience in the mind) *as to seem instantaneous*.” Biblical Theology, pages 33-34, An English *Interpretation* from the Latin Text of William Goold, by Stephen P. Westcott, 1994 (emphases mine).

I hold the view that the idea ‘there is a God’, is not innate in the sense that it is a ‘principle writ in the heart of man’. The mere conception of God in the mind, of itself, cannot be held to be true, because such a proposition to be true would necessitate, as a firm prior premise the proposition ‘that any or all concepts in the mind are true’, and this notoriously is not the case.

God is not a primary truth or axiom, He is an infinite Being who is invisible. Therefore his existence, so tenaciously acknowledged by man, must have been inferred from the perception of our own nature as existing, religious and moral, and from the objects of experience.

In discussing the question of the moral argument for God’s existence, Dabney maintains that conscience demonstrates contrivance for good ends and implies therefore a Contriver. Also an Obliger and Avenger are required to explain the imperatives of duty and fear to which conscience gives rise. He then remarks:

“For parallel: The intuitive belief in causation is *found on inspection*, to contain the proposition, ‘There is a first Cause.’ But in order for the validity of this proposition, it is not necessary for us to say that this intuition is God’s arbitrary implantation. *It is intrinsically true to the nature of things* (emphasis mine); and the argument to a first Cause therefore only the more valid.” (Emphases mine) Lectures in Systematic Theology, pages 16-17.

This closeness to our nature of the idea of God's existence is also highlighted by Thornwell:

"God is not given to us as a phenomenon of experience. There is no God consciousness apart from the necessary inferences of reason. All our knowledge of Him is mediate and representative. He is what intelligence finds in the inquiries which it raises upon the phenomena of experience. But the fact that philosophers have resorted to such theories as those of intuitional theology (i.e. innate knowledge of God, and the ontological proof), is a proof of how closely the conviction of a God lies to our nature." Writings, Volume 1, pages 72-73.

So though we do accept that the knowledge of God's existence is a natural and necessary inference from man's nature and the things that are made, we would hesitate to agree with Calvin's remark that men are by God, 'endued.....with some idea of his Godhead', if by that he really meant explicitly to assert *innate knowledge* in the strict sense.

### Calvin and Van Til

Calvin quotes Cicero, the great Roman orator and statesman, in his support, respecting this knowledge of God possessed by the unconverted, "But, as a heathen tells us, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God." Institutes, Book I, 3:1.

Calvin clearly teaches then that the knowledge unconverted men have of God arises from a correct and valid functioning of their rational faculty. Van Til's extreme assault upon the rational faculty of fallen men is contrary to this and it is quite unreasonable for Van Til to assert that he is being Calvinistic in his thesis.

By way of further illustration, Calvin said, "it is not easy to determine which of the two (knowledge of God or knowledge of ourselves) precedes, and gives birth to the other." *Ibid.* Book I, 1:1. Van Til interprets this to mean, "He (Calvin) did not start with man as with an ultimate starting point. Calvin did start with a general a priori position." Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 87. This is not a fair interpretation, but rather an attempt by Van Til to read Kuyperian doctrine into Calvin. Calvin is quite diffident about whether we start with God or man, saying it is '*not easy*' to determine this question. The proposal Calvin makes in explanation is in fact a posteriori, i.e. from ourselves to God:

"For in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone." Institutes, Book 1, 1:1.

As already indicated, Van Til has stated of man's response to this knowledge of God: "Of course, when we thus stress Paul's teaching that all men do not merely have a capacity for but are in actual possession of the knowledge of God, we have at once to add Paul's further instruction to the effect that *all* men, due to the sin within them, *always* and in *all* relationships seek to 'suppress'<sup>10</sup> this knowledge of God. (Romans 1:18, American Standard Version)." Apologetics, page 56.

---

<sup>10</sup> Van Til's use of this word to support his theory is not accepted by us, see page 27.

With respect to man's response to the natural knowledge of God he possesses, Van Til misrepresents Calvin. Van Til in his Introduction to Systematic Theology, pages 88-89, quotes the Institutes, Book I, 5:4, giving the distinct impression that it states that *all* men suppress the knowledge of God they possess, when in fact Calvin is describing *atheists* in the section cited. In Book I, 5:5 Calvin discusses persons who *deny the immortality of the soul*, and *pantheists*, while in the preceding section, Book I, 5:3, he refers to heathens, including Aristotle, who have *properly acknowledged God's work* in the creature. So according to Calvin there is a variety of attitudes among non-Christians respecting the work of God in creation and providence. They do not all utterly suppress this knowledge, and even those who seem to cannot avoid the truth. As Calvin says, "For though in old times there were *some*, and in the present day *not a few* are found who deny the being of a God, yet whether they will or not, they occasionally feel the truth which they are desirous not to know." Ibid. Book I, 3:2. (Emphases mine).

Here of course the contradictory element in Van Til continues to operate. For in the section where he has quoted Calvin concerning man's suppression of the natural knowledge of God, he says, "In the first place (with respect to Romans 1:18-21) we observe that Paul says that men do actually in some sense see the truth." Introduction to Systematic Theology, page 93. We are glad that Scripture forces this concession, though his qualification 'in some sense' leaves something to be desired, and close by he still telling us that, "No *sinner* can interpret reality aright." Ibid. page 92. I presume this means that Paul, "the chief of sinners", 1 Timothy 1:15, is the worst interpreter of reality that has ever lived. It might benefit Kuyperians to realise that they too are sinners. The contradictions in Van Til prompt me to quote Calvin's remark concerning the statements of other theologians on the subject of free will, who "have spoken so ambiguously or inconsistently on this subject, that *no certainty* is attainable from their writings." Institutes, Book II, 2:9.

To us Romans 1:18-21 includes a simple affirmation of the cosmological and teleological proofs of God's existence. We know that van Til rejects this idea. But one thing is plain, the proof of God's existence asserted in Romans 1 cannot be Van Til's 'only possible proof', i.e. an alleged ontological proof stated in Scripture terms, because the people acknowledging God in Romans 1, and those of whom Calvin speaks of doing the same, are the heathen without the scriptures.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 2:14

The above text reads: “But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Says Van Til, “I have criticized this Old Princeton apologetics in the way that Kuyper and Bavinck and Hepp have criticized positions similar to it. Dr. Samuel Volbeda says that this method of apologetics does not do justice to the Pauline statement that the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit since they are spiritually discerned.” Common Grace and the Gospel, pages 183-184. Van Til agrees with Volbeda, saying, “Apologetics should be so defined as not to carry with it implications contrary to 1 Corinthians 2:14.” Ibid.

This is the great Kuyperian proof text. Instead of accepting the Kuyperian interpretation without question, let us take heed carefully to J. C. Ryle’s warning, “It is a most unsound method of reasoning to take one or two expressions out of a book which has been written as one great whole, *to place* (emphasis mine) a certain meaning on these expressions, and then to refuse to enquire whether that meaning can be reconciled with the general spirit of the rest of the book. The beginning of every heresy and erroneous tenet in religion may be traced up to this kind of reasoning, and to unfair and partial quotations.” Knots Untied, page 107. He goes on to show how with single quotations Roman Catholics ‘prove’ transubstantiation, Arians ‘prove’ Christ’s inferiority to the Father, and Socinians ‘prove’ that Jesus is but a man.

Thus to interpret properly the scriptures with respect to this subject we must use a fair method of exegesis, which will include consideration of other verses touching on the knowledge of the unconverted, before falling for the Kuyperian view.

In the Greek text the word ‘receives’ is *δέχεται*, which means “to receive favourably, give ear to, embrace, make one’s own, approve, not to reject”, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon, pages 130-131, AP&A, reprint of 1885 Edition. The reception that the natural man does not give is thus more than *simple intellectual apprehension* which he can give.

Further, and most importantly ‘the things of the Spirit of God’ refer not to *all* knowledge, as Van Til alleges, but to those things revealed in Scripture not discoverable by the light of nature, especially the doctrines necessary unto salvation.

That Van Til means that all things are covered by the expression ‘the things of the Spirit of God’ is implicit in the following extract referring to the *natural man’s* knowledge:

“To be sure, he (the natural man) is said (by Roman Catholicism) to be in possession of the truth with respect to natural revelation. But (Van Til objects) if the natural man can and does interpret natural revelation in a way that is essentially correct there is no reason why he should need supernatural aid in order to interpret Christianity (which according to us is providing ‘the things of the Spirit of God’, as distinct from natural revelation) truly. At most he would need the information that Christ and his Spirit have come into the world. Hearing the news he would not fail, as a rational being, to make the proper reaction to it. If the natural man’s eyes (reason) enable him to see correctly in one dimension (the natural world), there is no good reason to think that these same eyes will not enable him, without further assistance from without, to see correctly in all

dimensions (the natural world and the ‘things of the spirit of God’ necessary unto salvation).”  
Apologetics, pages 52-53.

It is almost amusing in this quotation to see Van Til misusing Aristotelian logic, as he pays lip service to it, while we know he rejects it. He has put in a sequence of propositions without showing their rational connection, as usual. He has not demonstrated that the power of acquiring natural knowledge would *necessarily imply* a power of acquiring supernatural knowledge. On the face of it the exact opposite is the case. He is quietly and deceptively dogmatizing. In the passage above, to preserve the fallacious theory of Kuyperianism, he is forced to deny the very essence of the scriptural Calvinistic doctrine of saving grace, which teaches that the natural man needs ‘supernatural aid in order to interpret (or more properly to *accept savingly*) Christianity truly’. That is why fallen man is called *natural*, because he lacks this *supernatural* knowledge and needs grace (aid) to appropriate it for salvation. The quotation from Van Til is indeed more paradoxical when it is seen that in it he is attacking the doctrine of the need of supernatural grace (a firm Calvinistic tenet) as though it were a peculiarly Roman Catholic principle!

Doubtless Van Til’s attempt at a rejoinder would be to say that supernatural grace is needed to gain both unequivocal natural and supernatural knowledge, which is illogical, because such a construction leaves no meaning for the word *natural* in this context, i.e. it cannot be natural knowledge if it requires supernatural grace to obtain it! Again Van Til quietly ignores the fact that supernatural knowledge is attainable if you read the Bible. It is salvation by this knowledge that requires supernatural grace.

The following is proffered as a sound interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:14:

“This view gives us a consistent *rationale* of that impotency of the natural man to receive the things of the Spirit of God, which are foolishness unto him, described in 1 Corinthians 2:14 and elsewhere.....Does it (this impotency) consist in the absence of any substantive revelation, which the believer gains? No; this would be perilous fanaticism. Does it consist in the hiding of any esoteric sense of the Word to which the believer has the key? No; this would be Origenism. Does it consist in *the loss of a cognitive faculty by the fall*. No; that would *suspend his responsibility* (and would constitute dangerous Kuyperianism). Whence this impotency?.....The will has its own *habitus*, regulative of all its fundamental acts, which is *not a mere modification of the intelligence* but its own co-ordinate, original character. Hence an *interaction* of will and intellect. On *moral and spiritual* (as distinct from natural) subjects the *practical* (as distinct from the theoretical ) generalisations of the intellect are founded on the dictates of the will. But now, these *practical* judgments of the sinner’s understanding, prompted by carnal disposition, contradict certain propositions which are premises to the most important gospel conclusions and precepts. No wonder, then, that such a mind cannot apprehend them as reasonable! For example: The sinner’s real opinion, taught by a carnal heart, is, that sin in itself, apart from its penalty which self-love apprehends as an evil, would be the preferred good. A gospel is now explained to him, proposing deliverance from this sin, through the instrumentality of faith. But the plan postulates the belief that sin is *per se* so great an evil, that deliverance from it is a good greatly to be desired! No wonder, then, that, as this postulate breaks upon the understanding of the sinner, he is obfuscated, stumbled, dumb-founded! He is required to act on a belief which his carnal heart will not let him believe. His action, to be reasonable, must assume sin to be hateful. But he loves it! He feels that he naturally loves it, and only hates its consequences. ‘He cannot know the truth, for it is spiritually discerned.’” (Emphases, apart from *habitus* and *per se*, mine). Quoted from Dabney’s Lectures in Systematic Theology, pages 578-579.

Dabney's exegesis of this matter is far more spiritual, gospel-honouring and edifying than the assertions of Kuyperianism. Dabney would not have even thought it possible that Reformed theologians would be teaching that the natural knowledge of the natural man is invalid, with contradictory Kuyperian qualifications of course.

That the unconverted have unequivocal valid natural knowledge is demonstrated by the following facts: the wisdom of the Egyptians was learned by Moses, Acts 7:22; the wisdom of the Chaldeans was taught by Chaldeans to Daniel and others of the children of Israel, Daniel 1:4; Christ says, "You hypocrites, you can discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that you do not discern this time?" Luke 12:56. And, "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." Luke 16:8; we are commanded to be subject to ungodly rulers and magistrates, and this implies intellectual competence on their part; and Paul acknowledges King Agrippa's expertise in Jewish questions, Acts 26:3.

Their knowledge of the moral law is recognised, Romans 1:31, 2:14-15, Titus 1:12, 1 Corinthians 5:1, 15:33. As to the first truths of religion, Acts 17:28, Romans 1:18-20, 31, and James 2:19. As to their ability to acknowledge the truth of Scripture, Acts 26:27, and recognise Christ to be the Messiah, John 7:31, and John 12:42. Indeed we may have all this knowledge and yet still be nothing, 1 Corinthians 13:2.

As Dabney has demonstrated, the fault is not in the *speculative* or *theoretical* functioning of the intellect, but in its *practical* functioning. That is why Kuyperian exposition is complex, philosophical and unedifying, and why the old exegesis of men such as Thornwell and Dabney is straightforward, enlightening, practical and builds up.

So there can be no absolute distinction between the knowledge of Christians and non-Christians. 1 Corinthians 2:14 refers to the practical knowledge of the spiritual truths necessary unto salvation. This is a knowledge which includes approbation of these truths from the heart, and filial fellowship with God through the blood of Christ; i.e. it is a knowledge which involves more than intellectual assent. In support of this let it be said:

"They have done good service to the commonwealth of learning, who, leaving the unprofitable, speculative, and notional philosophy, have set upon the experimental. And any man may see that theology has been, especially by the school-men, as much corrupted; and that it is to be cured by reducing it unto practice and experience. For certainly religion consists not so much in the notions of truth in the mind (in which the devils, the most irreligious of all creatures, exceed all men), as in the faith and love of truth in the heart, and of the fruits of that faith in the life." The Works of Robert Traill, Volume 2, page iii, Banner of Truth, 1975.

## THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH DIVINES

The position of these divines in the matters under debate with Van Til is of particular importance to conservative evangelicals whose faith is expressed in the Westminster Confession, which was produced in the seventeenth century. Van Til was a Professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia and he more than implies that the justly well attested divines of this period would support his contentions, when he quotes with approval, and expounds the Westminster Confessional Standards, in his Apologetics, pages 18, 19, and 27-36, for example.

In examining this earlier English testimony, and its bearing upon Van Til's apparent espousal of the Westminster Standards, I would draw attention to the sound canon of interpretation of these Standards set forth by Benjamin Warfield: "We must be tolerant enough, whatever we believe, to allow the Westminster divines also their belief. And we must be sufficiently imbued with the historical spirit to be able to apprehend and state the doctrine of the Westminster Confession<sup>11</sup> as a pure question of scientific symbolics, without coloring derived from our own point of view." Selected Shorter Writings II, page 572. The matter Warfield is considering is their doctrine of inspiration, and in determining the question he quotes from their writings outside the Confession. By a procedure such as this I think it is fair to ascertain the apologetic stance of the Confession. This testimony is not provided in the expectation of convincing Kuypersians, some of whom have even attempted to adduce them in their own favour, but rather for encouragement to those who would adhere to the orthodox way.

Before proceeding, I cannot help making the observation that Van Til would not 'be tolerant enough' or 'sufficiently imbued with the historical spirit' to accept this argument, because, in line with modern humanism, he does not believe in 'pure' facts, nor that we can 'apprehend' any doctrine 'without coloring derived from our own point of view', as has been shown. See his Introduction to Warfield's Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, pages 19 and 20. Thus the genius of Warfield's approach, which is fair, tolerant, possible and truly Christian is quite opposed to Van Til.

It should be well known that the apologetics of 'Old Princeton', are older still. They in fact go back to the Puritan divines of the seventeenth century, of whom were the authors of the Westminster Confession. These men also were quite confident that Calvin was their forbear. Further it is quite reasonable to expect that the 'Old Princeton' divines, the Hodges and Warfield, who candidly took the Westminster Confession as their standard of doctrine, would be supported in their apologetic opinions by that tradition. This indeed we find is so. The same can be said for Thornwell and Dabney.

---

<sup>11</sup> Warfield describes the Westminster Confession as a "precious heritage", and that he signed these Standards "because commencing with the Scriptures I cannot make them teach anything else (but what these Standards teach)." The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, pages 111 and 419.

## A Matter of Contention

I am aware that Kuyperians have felt uncomfortable about the question of the testimony of the Puritan divines, see for example Puritan Apologetical Method, by Joseph A. Pipa, PREMISE, Volume 111, No. 3, March 29, 1996, pages 9 and ff, from the Internet.

It is not appropriate to deal in detail with that paper. However, provided their testimony is not put to an unfair use, it will be seen that it is difficult to adduce the Puritan divines, who were never asked whether they supported Kuyperianism or not, in favour of Kuyperian theory. The Puritans may be used to give an appearance of supporting Kuyperian theory, if the following observations are not given due allowance:

1. Some Puritan divines may have denied that there is a natural theology. Dabney has alluded already to that possibility.
2. The Puritans' strong testimony that Natural Theology is not saving or even a preservative from spiritual and moral degeneration, does not in itself represent support for Kuyperianism. It is a postulate of traditional evidential apologetics.
3. As a corollary the testimony of Puritans to the degeneration of the heathen into paganism, described by Paul in Romans 1, should not be construed to mean that they denied a Natural Theology.
4. Most especially, just as I have pointed to a similar misuse of Calvin by Van Til, the Puritan testimony against speculative and even practical atheism, should not be allowed to be construed as though it covered *all* natural men.
5. I have yet to see any Puritan testimony adduced which equivocates in the style of Van Til, over the wonderful intellectual skill of natural men in the natural world, a skill witnessed to *unequivocally* and clearly by Calvin.
6. It is a favourite contention of the modern followers of Van Til to talk of Natural Revelation, whilst denying a Natural Theology, and assert that this Revelation is to leave men without excuse. These apologists quietly omit the point asserted by the Puritans that to have this effect of leaving men without excuse, this Revelation also has *convinced* reason.

## The Divines Themselves

The divines I have selected to demonstrate the Puritan testimony are representative of the period, and fairly accessible, though not all were actually members of the Westminster Assembly (1643-1649). There is no evidence that the Assembly divines as a whole differed from the opinions expressed by the selected writers.

**William Twisse** (~1575-1646)

Pastor of Newbury, and appointed Prolocutor of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster in 1643, in which he continued until his death. He states:

“And albeit, *Aristotle*, the greatest of Philosophers, maintained the eternity (of the world) without beginning; yet he confesses ingenuously<sup>12</sup> in his Book *De coelo*, that *all that went before him maintained* (emphasis mine) *mundum genitum esse* (the world was made [by God]); neither was his discourse of power to raze out that natural instinct (that the world was made by God), which seems to be graven in the hearts of men, and was the chief ground of that universal acknowledgment of a divine power supreme. Now as God made himself known by his works so I nothing doubt but herewithal it was their duty to know him, and according to their knowledge to serve him and glorify him, in acknowledgment of his glorious nature, so far as they took notice of it; But as a rule whereby they should worship him, I know none that God had given them, or that they could gather from the contemplation of the creatures. And surely the knowledge of God, as a Creator only, *is nothing sufficient to salvation* (emphasis mine); but the knowledge of him as Redeemer: And therefore *seeing the World by wisdom knew not God* (as a Redeemer unto salvation), *it pleased God by the foolishness of Preaching to save them that believe*, 1 Corinthians 1:21. From The Riches of God’s Love etc., Oxford, 1653, cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 6, page 200, Baker, 1991.

**John White** (1574-1648)

Pastor of Trinity Parish in Dorchester, and a member of the Assembly, says:

“It is true, that the very light of nature, which God has planted in *every man* (emphasis mine), will discover unto him some of the chief heads of the duties, that he requires of him, as to love the Lord with all our hearts, and to fear, and serve him, Deuteronomy 10:12. And to serve one another through love, Galatians 5:13. But in what particular services we are to express our piety to God, or love to men, what can man prescribe or imagine.....Whatsoever was impossible to be known by any creature, or to be found out *by discourse of natural reason* (emphasis mine), that must of necessity be discovered and made known by God himself.....(and) we find them discoverable in the Scriptures.” A Way to the Tree of Life, pages 13 and 25, London, 1647 cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 6, page 200.

**John Arrowsmith** (1602--~1659)

Master of both St. John’s and Trinity colleges, successively, and Royal or Public Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, and a member of the Assembly. He says:

“.....so though natural reason improved can make it appear *that there is* a God, yet there is a necessity of Scripture-revelation to inform us *who and what he is*, in regard of his Essence, Subsistence, and Attributes.” A Chain of Principles, page 128, Cambridge, 1659, cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 6, page 198.

**William Bridge** (~1600-1670)

Minister of the Gospel at Yarmouth, and a congregational member of the Assembly, says:

---

<sup>12</sup> Obsolete English usage of ‘ingeniously’ present in the original, see Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, page 434, Merriam, 1972.

“For though Reason be the Gift of God, *yet it does not proceed from God as he is God* (emphasis mine), and General Ruler of the World.....Though *the light of reason be good, yet it is not saving light* (emphases mine).....’Tis Revelation-Light from the Gospel, that does bring to Heaven: Mere Human Reason cannot do it.” Scripture Light, the Most Sure Light, pages 32,33, London, 1656 cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 6, page 199.

### **Anthony Burgess**

Once a Fellow of Emmanuel College in Cambridge, Pastor of the church of Sutton-Coldfield, Warwickshire, and a member of the Assembly. He says:

“Now that God by the works of his Creation and Providence in the world, does teach *and convince* (emphasis mine) men, and so in that general way call men, is plain Romans 1.....So then, the whole world, in the excellent harmony of it, does necessarily teach a God.....This invitation *Paul* considers in his sermon at *Athens*, Acts 17:27.....To what purpose is this call of God by the Creatures, and the work of his providence, *if it be not to salvation? Yes it is much every way* (emphasis mine):.....

“Men therefore are made inexcusable by this way; they cannot say, God has left them without any *conviction* (emphasis mine) or manifestation of himself.....

“He (the sinner) willfully runs himself in the committing of sins, against *his conscience and knowledge* (emphases mine); he does with delight and joy, tumble himself in the mire and filth of sin: Now God calls by these natural ways, to curb and restrain him, to put a bound to these waves: For if there were not these *general convictions* (emphasis mine), no Societies, no Commonwealths could consist. Spiritual Refining: or a Treatise of Grace and Assurance, pages 692-694, London, 1652, cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 6, pages 196-197.

### **Edmund Calamy (1600-1666)**

Pastor of Aldermanbury, London, and a member of the Assembly, says:

“Blessed be God who has not only given us the book of the Creatures, and the book of Nature to know himself and his will by; but also, and especially the book of the Scriptures, whereby we come to know those things of God and of Christ, which neither the book of Nature nor of the Creatures can reveal unto us.” The Godly Man’s Ark etc., ~page 90, Seventh Edition, London, 1672, cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 6, page 198.

### **Thomas Goodwin (1600-1679)**

Minister of the Gospel in London, a congregational member of the Assembly, and President of Magdalen College, Oxford. Goodwin was appointed by the Assembly to present the ‘Directory for Public Worship’ to Parliament on December 21, 1644. He is also a signatory to the ‘Epistle to the Reader (of the Confession of Faith)’ prefacing the Westminster Standards. See Westminster Confession of Faith, page 6, Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Edition, 1976. Goodwin was also present at the Conference at Savoy in 1658 which produced the Savoy Declaration for Congregational Churches, which doctrinally is in all essentials very similar to the Westminster Confession. He says:

“Wherefore they (the defects of the understanding in spirituals and naturals caused by the fall) are repaired since the fall by two several remedies, viz. gifts, and the grace of spiritual knowledge; *gifts of knowledge and wisdom you shall find where grace is not* (emphasis mine). Thus the heathens had the imperfections of the mind repaired in *natural and civil knowledge* (emphasis mine) as much as we. And unregenerate men also have spiritual gifts.....But these gifts are not grace.” Man’s Guiltiness before God, page 141, Sovereign Grace, 1960.

In this quote we see the classical Protestant distinction, not agreed to by Van Til, of spiritual knowledge from natural knowledge, and an unequivocal affirmation of the competence of the heathen in the latter, said to be ‘as much as we’. He notices also the interesting point that spiritual gifts, which imply a competent knowledge, may be possessed by unregenerate persons. A sound Protestant exegesis has always recognised this without equivocation.

### **John Owen (1616-1683)**

A congregational minister, Pastor at Coggeshall, at one time Dean of Christ Church Oxford and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. He is virtually the twin theologian of Thomas Goodwin. Though not a member of the Westminster Assembly he was of the Conference at Savoy in 1658.

Owen in his recently interpreted Latin works, Biblical Theology, referred to above, is very firm in asserting the insufficiency of Natural Theology for salvation. He nonetheless clearly acknowledges the competence of the fallen intellect for many tasks, which is affirmed by the numerous quotations he has made from heathen authors in his works. He says:

“Human intellect, struggling as it must under the defect of indwelling sin, has still that within it which constantly urges onward to seek for God, and to find out what is knowable about Him from His works of creation and providence.....Attempt, as men will, to systematize such thinking and urges, to label and analyze them, still all must come to the same futile end at last. *The human mind is advanced in knowledge of the earth and of the universe without*, but still, by its reasonings, it could not find any answers to its condition or any contact with its Creator.” Op. cit. page 97.

Owen warns frankly of the pride of men’s intellects obstructing their spiritual apprehension of the gospel:

“There is, therefore, no such effectual obstruction of divine teachings as the pride of men’s minds which is utterly inconsistent with them. Hence it is that men come with carnal confidence in themselves, the ability and sagacity of their own minds, to the consideration of the gospel and the things contained in it, without the least peculiar awe or reverence of God from whom it is; and hence do they suppose themselves, without more ado, competent judges of the mind of the Holy Ghost in all divine revelations.” Works, Volume VII, pages 124-125.

From the context it is clear that in this reference Owen is condemning the *abuse* of reason by sinful men. Elsewhere he teaches that men may believe the truth of the gospel with a valid *historical faith*, supported by reason and sometimes the conviction of the Holy Spirit, short of *saving faith*:

“This faith is usually called ‘historical faith’. But this denomination of it is not taken from the *object* of it, as though it were only the history of the Scripture, or the historical things contained in it. For *it respects the whole truth of the word* (emphasis mine), yea of the promises of the gospel as well as other things. But it is so called from the *nature of the assent* wherein it does consist; for

it is such as we give unto historical things that are credibly testified unto us.....Some apprehend it (the whole truth of the Word that is) on human motives only, and its credibility unto *the judgment of reason* (emphasis mine); and their assent is a mere *natural* act of their understanding, which is the lowest degree of this historical faith. Some have their minds enabled unto it by spiritual illumination, making a discovery of the evidences of divine truth whereon it is to be believed; the assent they give hereon is more firm and operative than that of the former sort.....This faith I grant to be true in its kind, and not merely to be *equivocally* (emphasis mine) so called: it is not *πιστις ψευδωνυμος* (a faith falsely named). It is so unto the general nature of faith; but of the same special nature with justifying faith it is not.” Works, Volume V, page 72.

Owen accepts it as given, contrary to Van Til, that unregenerate men have the ability to understand and accept, without equivocation, historical testimony. There is no absurd assertion that ‘description is explanation’. He says they are able to believe ‘the whole truth of the word’, and that reason unsanctified, can judge competently the credibility of Scripture. This is simply to say, with Paul: “King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.” Van Til at the very least equivocates over the knowledge of non-Christians with respect to *all* things.

### **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677)

Pastor at Stoke-Newington, Middlesex, later at Covent-Garden, London, and at Pinner’s Hall, London. A signatory of the ‘Epistle to the Christian Reader’ of the Confession of Faith, and author of another ‘Epistle to the Reader’ Prefacing the Confession, see Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Edition, pages 7-10. In a comment upon “Thou believest there is one God, thou doest well; the devils believe and tremble”, James 2:19, he remarks of historical faith:

“It is an approbation (by the apostle) of such assent (to the affirmation of the existence of one God) so far as it is good, and not rested in; though it be not saving, yet so far as it is historical it is good—good in its kind, as a common work and preparation, for so it is required: ‘Hear, O Israel, our God is one Lord’, Deuteronomy 6:4.” In The Epistle James, page 240, Banner of Truth, 1968.

Also he says:

“There is a threefold light:—1. Sense or instinct; 2. Reason; 3. Grace; and accordingly as a man is furnished he may be said to be *πνευματικος*, *spiritual*, or furnished with the light of grace, or *ψυχικος*, which we translate *natural*, 1 Corinthians 2:14—it signifies one that has nothing but the light of a reasonable soul. Lastly, *φυσικος*, merely natural, which signifies one guided by the blind motion and instinct of nature, without reason, counsel and choice, as beasts are.” Comment upon Jude 10, in An Exposition of Jude, page 265, Sovereign Grace, 1972.

It is clear that Manton believes, without the Kuyperian equivocation, that the natural man can acknowledge validly one true God.

### **Matthew Poole** (1624-1679)

Another signatory to ‘The Epistle to the Christian Reader’ of the Confession of Faith. In a footnote to the Preface to the Commentary on the Holy Bible, which bears his name, Volume 1, page iii, Banner of Truth, 1968, it states: “As Matthew Poole did not live to complete the

work beyond Isaiah 58, the remainder of the Annotations (being The Commentary), were compiled by various other divines, who also wrote the Preface. In executing their work they drew largely from Poole's own *Synopsis Criticorum*—a massive work in five folio volumes written in Latin and designed to bring into one view whatever had been written by critics of all ages and nations on the books of Holy Scripture. *Thus the complete commentary although not compiled by Poole is nevertheless largely the fruit of his labours.*" (Emphasis mine).

The comment upon Romans 1:20, "For the invisible things of him etc." is as follows:

"Because it might be further objected in behalf of the Gentiles, that the notions of God imprinted in their nature are so weak, that they may be well excused; therefore the apostle adds, that the certainty of them is further confirmed by the book of the creatures, which was written before them in capital letters, so that he that runs may read. *The invisible things of him*: the apostle tells us afterwards himself what he means by the invisible things of God, viz. his being and his attributes, particularly his eternity and almighty power; to which we might add, his wisdom, goodness, &c. These, though invisible in themselves, yet are discernible by his works, and that ever since the creation of the world. By what they see created, they may easily collect *or understand* (emphasis mine), that there is an eternal and almighty Creator; *they may argue from the effects to the cause* (emphasis mine). *So that they are without excuse*: some render it, that they may be without excuse; but it is better rendered in our translation: the meaning is, not that God *gave them that knowledge* (emphasis mine) for this end or purpose, that they might be inexcusable, for they might catch even at that for an excuse; but the plain sense is this, that God has given all men such means of knowledge as suffices to leave them without excuse, *there can be no pretence of ignorance* (emphasis mine)."

In the interpretation of verse 21, "Because that, when they knew God etc.," it is said:

"*They knew God*; they had a natural knowledge of God (emphasis mine), it was taught them, as before, by the light of nature, and by the book of the creatures. *Though this was not sufficient to save them* (emphasis mine), yet it was sufficient to leave them without excuse."

This exegesis is a typical affirmation of the traditional apologetic and therefore unacceptable to Van Til. And it should be noted that *κατεχοντων* in verse 18 is interpreted as 'suppressed', indicating that this preferred translation of Van Til is still quite consistent with the apologetic system he is so opposed to.

### **Stephen Charnock (1628-1680)**

Pastor in Southwark, Fellow and Senior Proctor New College, Oxford, Chaplain in Dublin, Ireland, and Co-Pastor with Thomas Watson, Crosby Square, London. He affirms the natural man's ability to validly acknowledge God's existence:

".....is it not folly for an *atheist* (as distinct from *all* men), to deny that which is *the reason* and common sentiment of *the whole world*, to strip himself of humanity, run counter to his own conscience, prefer a private before a *universal judgment*, give the lie to *his own nature and reason*, assert things *impossible to be proved*, nay impossible to be acted, forge irrationalities for the support of his fancy against the common persuasion of the world, and against himself, and so much of God as is manifest in him and every man.? Romans 1:19." (Emphases mine). The Existence and Attributes of God, Volume 1, pages 41-42.

Furthermore, Charnock, despite his stating quite firmly that "No man is exempted from some spice of atheism by the deprivation of his nature....." Ibid. Page 25, supports quite clearly

the traditional theistic proofs, as in the following quote, where he invokes Thomas Aquinas in his support, which excludes any equivocation that might be attempted in this matter:

“God in regard of his existence is not only the discovery of faith, *but of reason*. God has revealed not only his being, but some sparks of his eternal power and godhead in his works, as well as in his word. (Romans 1:19,20), ‘God has showed it unto them,’—how? (at this point Aquinas is cited) in his works; by the things that are made, it is *a discovery to our reason*, as shining in the creatures; and an object of our faith as breaking out upon us in the Scriptures: it is an article of our faith, and *an article of our reason*. Faith *supposes natural knowledge*, as grace supposes *nature* (this is a clear affirmation of the nature-grace distinction). Faith is properly of things above reason, purely depending upon revelation. What can be *demonstrated by natural light* is not so properly the object of faith; though in regard of *the addition* of a certainty by revelation it is so.” (Emphases mine). Ibid. Page 27

This further quotation is worth notice, because in it Charnock points out that Socinians, who teach that Christ is only a man, hold a view about natural knowledge similar to that held by Van Til:

“I have spoken more of this place (Hebrews 11:6), because the Socinians use this to decry any natural knowledge of God, and that the existence of God is only to be known by revelation (of Scripture), so that by that reason (they argue that) any one that lived without the Scripture has no ground to believe the being of a God. (However), The Scripture ascribes a knowledge of God to all nations in the world (Romans 1:19); not only a faculty of knowing, if they had arguments and demonstrations, as an ignorant man in any art has a faculty to know; but *it ascribes an actual knowledge* (verse 10), ‘manifest in them’; (verse 21) ‘They knew God’, *not they might know him*; they knew him when they did not care for knowing him. The notices of God are *as intelligible to us by reason, as any object in the world is visible*; he is written in every letter. Ibid. page 28. (Emphases mine).

Charnock’s testimonies are a plain statement of the traditional apologetic: clear, rational and scriptural.

**Thomas Watson** (D.O.B. not known, died supposedly 1689 or 1690)

Rector of St Stephen’s, Walbrook, London, Co-Pastor with Stephen Charnock Crosby Square, London. A signatory of the ‘Epistle to the Christian Reader’ of the Confession of Faith. He says:

“We know that there is a God by his works (of creation), and this is so evident a demonstration of a Godhead, *that the most atheistical spirits*, when they have considered these works, have been forced to *acknowledge* some wise and supreme maker of these things; as is reported of Galen and others.” A Body of Divinity, page 39, Banner of Truth, 1965. (Emphases mine).

And, in a direct allusion to Aristotle, “All motion, the philosophers say, is from *something that is unmoveable* (i.e. an unchanging source of power, emphasis mine).....If one should ask, Who moves that highest orb, called *Primum Mobile*, or is the first mover of the planets? It can be no other than God himself.” Ibid. Page 40<sup>13</sup>.

Also, “Aristotle, though a heathen, not only acknowledged God, when he cried out, ‘Thou Being of beings, have mercy on me’; but he thought he that did not confess a deity was not worthy to live.” The Ten Commandments, page 53, Banner of Truth, 1965.

---

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller statement of this principle see page 83.

I had understood that Van Til was aware of the nature of the apologetic stance of the divines of the Westminster period, and that he was happy to object to it; and in the past we were comfortable with the fact that Kuypersians had the tendency to call these divines 'seventeenth century scholastics', in a pejorative sense. Now we hear, evidently because Kuypersians are feeling the pressure of being accused of opposition to the Confession of Faith, that attempts have been made, as alluded to above, to make out that the English Puritan theologians support Kuypersian apologetics. I have adduced these quotations at some length to rebut, if not refute, this suggestion.

## ARISTOTLE

It is perhaps not essential for us to defend Aristotle, however, in the interests of fair play, and because Aristotle has a not insignificant place in the development of the traditional apologetic, and has provided excellent tools of logic to challenge effectively the position of Van Til, he (Aristotle) is worth consideration.

Van Til, as might be expected from his transcendentalist and idealist leanings, is particularly severe on Aristotle. Instead of agreeing that Aristotle did acknowledge the true God, as Watson affirms above, Van Til asserts that Aristotle's method brings us to nothing better than a finite God. Because Thomas Aquinas used Aristotle's method in developing the traditional theistic proofs, Van Til refers to apologetics which teach that the theistic proofs are valid, as Roman Catholic, though he does recognise that others have followed in these footsteps. Van Til's castigation is as follows: "He (the Roman Catholic apologist) will try to prove the existence of God by the method of Aristotle.....So doing he does not prove the existence of the ontological Trinity; he 'proves' the existence of a god, a god that fits into the pattern of 'being in general'." Apologetics, page 17.

The undemonstrated assumption, but then Van Til does not have to worry about such things, is that unless you acknowledge the Trinity, which you cannot do without Scripture, you are in no way whatsoever acknowledging the true God. Well this is equivalent to saying that the Wright brothers knew nothing about 'real' flight because, with their limitations, they had not in the first instance produced a jet air liner. Well contrary to Van Til, to affirm that limited knowledge is still *true* knowledge, is not to assert *absolute autonomy*, but to confess finiteness.

Roman Catholics affirm the existence of the Triune God. Yet perhaps he would say, because they are Roman Catholics, they do not have 'real' knowledge either. Then we should ask just how much of the Kuyperian shibboleth must be spoken and believed before you can have *true* knowledge. Van Til might object that this is unfair, and say that all that is required for *true* knowledge is scriptural regeneration. But then, because their view of regeneration emphasises an eradication of what they call the *noetic* (intellectual) effects of the fall, Kuyperians lack any credible doctrine of historical faith, and are therefore untrustworthy guides. So how can anybody get true knowledge?

In passing it is worth indicating again that it is improper for Van Til to use the philosophical term 'ontological Trinity', when Paul has proscribed the teaching of Scripture doctrines in 'the words that man's wisdom teaches'.

Van Til is quite critical of the Aristotelian philosophy as a whole, because, as might be expected, he considers that it proceeds on the basis of man as autonomous: "But in practice Rome (insinuating again that it is not Reformed to do so) teaches that those who take reason as autonomous and who therefore make man the final point of reference in predication are essentially right in their methodology. In particular is this the case with Aristotle who is constantly called 'the philosopher' by St. Thomas and frequently said to be right in his basic methodology." A Christian Theory of Knowledge, page 72, Baker, 1969.

## Preliminary Considerations

A full discussion of Aristotle is not appropriate nor intended here. Some notice is taken for the purpose of clarification. Aristotle's reputation has suffered in some Reformed circles because *some* medieval scholastic theologians used his methods in their theological works. Because the scholastic theology supported the doctrines of transubstantiation and salvation by works, and much of its other discussions have become a byword for vanity, this has damaged Aristotle's reputation.

However, one consideration ought to moderate criticism of Aristotle: viz. the scholastic theologians, not being able to read Greek, could not consult Aristotle in the original, and had to examine his work in translations made by Arabic interpreters. The implication of this is that what Aristotle really taught was not present to the attention of the scholastics.

As with philosophy in general the Christian teacher must stand on guard and keep the special discussions and methods of philosophy separate from theology, which is quite capable of erecting its own noble structure from its true source, the Scriptures. So it is wrong to embroil Aristotle's teachings, right or wrong, in the redemptive science. As already indicated, John Owen has strongly recommended this, and another quotation from him to the same effect will not go astray:

“The schoolmen brought this expression (the word ‘morals’, in Greek ηθικα) with all its concerns, as they did the rest of Aristotle’s philosophy, into the church and divinity; and I cannot but think it had been well if they had never done it, as all will grant they might have omitted some other things without the least disadvantage to learning or religion. However, this expression of ‘moral virtue’ having absolutely possessed itself of the fancies and discourses of all, and, it may be, of the understanding of some, though with very little satisfaction when all things are considered, I shall not endeavour to dispossess it or eliminate it from the confines of Christian theology. Only, I am sure had we been left to the scripture expressions of ‘repentance towards God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, of the fear of God, of holiness, righteousness, living unto God, walking with God, and before him,’ we might have been free from many vain, wordy perplexities.....for let but the Scripture express what it is to be religious, and there will be no contesting about the difference between grace and moral virtue.” Works, Volume XIII, pages 412-413.

The spirit of these remarks of Owen's are much against the system of Van Til, which incorporates so much Kantian philosophical dialect. Concerning the first truths of religion—the existence of God, and, taking cognisance of Owen's objection and concession above concerning the term ‘moral’, the moral law also, Aristotle's teaching can be noticed for what it is worth. Owen in support of his own teachings, and without vitiating the principle of protecting the redemptive science from philosophy, has in fact has made quite a number of quotations from Aristotle (see Owen's Works, Volume XVI, page 608). Having said this, then, in the philosophical realm, Aristotle can be judged on his own merits.

To say this of course is to go against Van Til, for he will not allow that the light of nature can erect a valid philosophy, distinct from theology, without Scripture control. It is unreasonable for Van Til to suggest that men making discoveries by the light of nature, with freedom to err as well as to judge correctly, in other words with a finite autonomy, are acting *necessarily* in an imperious autonomous manner. Many philosophers have attempted to break their legitimate bounds, abusing reason in the process, but this is not the case with all the efforts of all non-Christian philosophers, as Van Til implies. To repeat Calvin's assertions: ‘Shall we deny the possession of intellect to those (the heathen philosophers) who drew up rules for

discourse, and taught us to speak in accordance with reason?’ And, ‘Shall we say that the philosophers, in their exquisite researches and skillful description of nature, were blind?’

### Aristotle and the Doctrine of God

Having assumed incorrectly the eternity of matter and the series of organisms<sup>14</sup>, see above, and the eternity of movement<sup>15</sup>, which is *constructive* change, as he said, from matter to form (or *becoming* from *potential* to *act*, produced necessarily by something in *act*<sup>16</sup>), Aristotle by ingenious consideration and logical reasoning, not dependent upon the incorrect assumption that he had made, but dependent upon change, or movement, and causation, recognised intuitively as the source of change, came to the conclusion that: “We must therefore assume the existence of a being itself *unmoved* (i.e. unchanging) which can somehow cause eternal movement. This Prime Mover, eternal changeless and containing no element of matter or unrealised potentiality (i.e. He is pure act), keeps the heavenly bodies moving and maintains the eternal life of the universe<sup>17</sup>.” The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers, page 31.

It is not only Roman Catholics that have recognised the validity of Aristotle’s affirmations concerning God. Thomas Watson did so, as above. Thornwell states: “The ancient philosophers concur in the same fundamental truth. The supreme God of Plato and Aristotle figures as the supreme intelligence or mind.” Writings, Volume 1, page 175. Calvin states: “Hence certain of the philosophers (among whom Aristotle is cited, from his work *Hist. Anim. lib. i. c. 17*) have not improperly called man a microcosm (miniature world), as being a rare specimen of divine power, wisdom and goodness, and containing within himself wonders sufficient to occupy our minds, if we are willing so to employ them.” Institutes, Book I, 5:3.

It is clear however, that Aristotle’s view of God is incomplete, as it must be because he was without Scripture. As above he did not recognise God’s creating all out of nothing, a doctrine Plato came closest to among the heathen philosophers, again simply because this requires almost certainly the scriptures to discover it. Aristotle’s view of providence was either defective or nonexistent<sup>18</sup>. Nonetheless Frederick Copleston remarks that though Plato came

---

<sup>14</sup> This because, without scripture the human mind cannot conceive of an absolute commencement, which creation is, i.e. the mind is bound by the principle—*ex nihilo nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing comes). Creation *ex nihilo* by God, the only other possibility, cannot be *denied* by the human mind. Scripture however, as above, is needed to *affirm* it.

<sup>15</sup> This because he reckoned, incorrectly, that time was from eternity, and that, because time is *indissolubly connected* with change, which is correct, therefore *movement* is eternal.

<sup>16</sup> I.e. *Act* has priority over *potential* and is needed to bring potential to the higher state of act or realised potential: to change it from *matter* to *form*. The higher state, of act, cannot be reached from the lower state, of potential, *unaided*.

<sup>17</sup> Thus Aristotle brilliantly affirmed God’s immutability, spirituality (He cannot be material because matter is always subject to change), perfection, and necessity, i.e.—the only possible source of *motion*.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, having conclusively demonstrated God’s immutability, believed that if God was to *commence* movement in time, or *intervene* in the affairs of the world, He would Himself need to change. This of course is rationalistic, but it was done in good faith, because without scripture, in wrestling with these issues, Aristotle was upholding God’s changelessness. He believed that *motion*, or constructive change from potential to act in the perceived universe, was induced through attraction to God, rather than by a direct act of God, and that God’s highest act is contemplation of Himself, or “thought of thought.” Thus Aristotle affirmed the teleological principle, that God is the ultimate end (*tel ov*) of existence, to which it is all directed, a position far in advance of beggarly modern materialism. In this context it is worth noting further, that in company with Socrates and Plato,

closer to the doctrine of creation than Aristotle, and did recognise Divine providence, yet Aristotle “shows a clearer apprehension of the ultimate Godhead than Plato does.” A History of Philosophy, Volume 1, Part II, page 60.

### **Aristotle and Pantheism**

Aristotle has been linked with ancient pantheism, because he taught the prior eternity of the series of organisms and that God was in a sense an Anima Mundi (i.e. world spirit). In the opinion of the best expositors however, Aristotle avoids frank pantheism because he distinguished God as an intelligent active cause.

The weakness in Aristotle in distinguishing God from the world, just alluded to, is aggravated by his failure to ascribe definitely personality to God. Thus there are scholars who consider that the God of Aristotle is not personal. Charles Hodge concurs in this view, see his Systematic Theology, Volume 1, page 327, Eerdmans 1973, as does Van Til. But this is debatable. Copleston remarks: “Aristotle may not have spoken of the First Mover as being personal, and certainly the ascription of anthropomorphic personality would be far indeed from his thoughts, but since the First Mover is intelligence or thought, it follows that He is personal in the philosophic sense.” A History of Philosophy, Volume 1, Part II, page 59. Dabney agrees with this, saying of the Anima Mundi, that “it obviously has intelligence, choice, and will: and how can personality be better defined?” Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 22.

Given that Aristotle’s attempts were the best among heathen philosophers in setting forth the natural knowledge of God possessed by man, it is very clear that such knowledge falls utterly short of Christianity, which provides a much more complete knowledge of God, a knowledge unto salvation, with redemption, and fellowship with God. Aristotle’s failure in these respects are a demonstration of Paul’s so true assertion, “For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching (the gospel) to save them that believe.” 1 Corinthians 1:21

### **Ockham Duns Scotus and Aristotle**

Acceptance of Aristotle was not universal in Roman Catholicism. There were Roman Catholics in earlier times, the Ockhamists certainly, and doubtless there are still some today, critical of Aristotle, just as Kuiperians are.

As an aside, in light of the fact that Kuiperians have had a hardly concealed tendency to call the traditional apologetic ‘scholastic’, it is worth reinforcing the point that Kuiperianism has scholastic roots also. Ockham represents one such root. Duns Scotus may be another. There is debate as to whether Scotus did cast doubt, as Kuiperians do, upon the theistic proofs. In his Oxford Commentary, Scotus asserts a Natural Theology, whereas in a work called the

---

Aristotle affirmed in his *De Anima* the existence of the human soul (yuch) distinct from the body. This against Leucippus and Democritus, who considered that “all existence consisted in a *fortuitous concourse of atoms*.” See A History of Philosophy, Volume 1, Part II, page 69, by Frederick Copleston, Doubleday, 1962. This observation is traceable to an original postulate of Anaxagoras, from which Socrates derived the *necessary* spirituality of mind (nou), stated in Plato’s *Phaedo*.

Theoremata, attributed to him, such natural knowledge is repudiated. This makes it difficult to be sure of his definitive position. See A History of Philosophy, Volume 2, Part II, by Frederick Copleston, pages 201-204. The analogy I have drawn between Ockham and Kuyperianism remains unimpaired, and whoever did write the Theoremata also anticipated Kuyperianism by a considerable period.

### **Aristotle's Philosophy in General**

There are on the other hand, sound Protestant theologians, opposed to Roman Catholicism, who yet greatly appreciate Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle's syllogistic logic, his theory of happiness, his doctrine of the golden mean, his view of efficient and final causes, and of teleology are all commendable. John Owen also, just like Aquinas, calls Aristotle "the philosopher", and even "the great philosopher", Works, Volume II, pages 343, and 8. As above, William Twisse called Aristotle 'the greatest of philosophers'. Dabney says of him that he was "perhaps the most sagacious of pagan thinkers." Lectures in Systematic Theology, page 22. Charles Bridges, the author of the highly esteemed Commentary on the Proverbs, Banner of Truth, 1968, calls Aristotle "the prince of heathen philosophy." Op. cit. page 620.

Thornwell especially, has a high estimate of Aristotle. He regards Aristotle's theory of happiness, though incomplete, "as one of the finest discussions in the whole compass of ancient philosophy." Writings, Volume 2, page 463. He provides this commendation of Aristotle's moral philosophy:

"Aristotle, among the ancients, was unquestionably in advance of every age which preceded the introduction of Christianity, and is still in advance of many who call themselves Christians, in his clear and steady perception of the indissoluble connection betwixt the cogitative and practical departments of man's nature in reference to duty." Ibid. Pages 481-482.

And as an excellent definitive summary:

"For myself, I have long looked upon the Scriptures as containing the key to the true solution of the problem of existence; and I have been struck, in several instances, with the remarkable fact, that the speculations of Aristotle break down just where a higher light was needed to guide him. He has tracked truth through the court and sanctuary to the mystic veil, which he was not permitted to lift. One hint from revelation would have perfected his theory of happiness (the hint was "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever." Answer to Question 1, Westminster Shorter Catechism); a single line of Moses (I presume with respect to God's creating all out of nothing for his own glory) would have saved a world of perplexity, touching the relations of matter and form." Life and Letters of Thornwell, by Benjamin M. Palmer, page 412, Banner of Truth, 1974.

This judgment of Thornwell's of course contradicts Kuyperianism in the hands of Van Til. Thornwell sees the revealed system of truth as supplementing the light of nature at cardinal points, i.e. it has a substantial additive effect of great importance. Revelation 'solves the problem of existence' and brings the word of reconciliation to us. There is no equivocation or invalidation of what man has done with natural light, when it is true. Thus Van Til's sweeping criticism of Aristotle is unacceptable to us, and is not a true representation of the real state of affairs.

Thomas Peck an eminent pupil of Thornwell's, and afterwards a colleague of Dabney, in further support of these contentions states:

“Although the Reformation produced a rebellion against the authority of Aristotle, yet it was rather a rebellion against the preposterous height of authority to which that great genius had been exalted (by the Schoolmen) than against the authority itself. Truly there are few facts more wonderful in the history of the world than the vast and absolute sway of that imperial mind (of Aristotle) over well-nigh all the thinking of Europe and Asia for so many centuries; an empire vaster and more absolute than that of his pupil, Alexander the Great. Soon after the first effervescence of the Reformation had subsided, we find him regaining his authority in the universities and holding it down to the times of Des Cartes and of Lord Bacon. By Lord Bacon, indeed, the defectiveness of Aristotle's *Organon* was demonstrated, and (Bacon's) *Novum Organum* set the human race upon a new and glorious career of discovery (by the principle of the Inductive Logic<sup>19</sup>) in all knowledges, the fruits of which we see everywhere around us. But the deductive logic of the Stagirite (Aristotle) still continues, and will continue to the end of time, to be the most impregnable, as well as the most amazing, structure ever reared by a single mind.”  
Writings of Thomas E Peck, Volume 2, page 214, Banner of Truth, 1999.

---

<sup>19</sup> The nature of Inductive Logic, and its relation to theology, is discussed in Dabney's Lectures in Systematic Theology, pages 91-93. Dabney has derived from Archbishop Whateley the definition of true induction, or *inductive demonstration*, distinguishing it from “the (simple) colligation of similar instances of sequence.” Op. cit. *Inductive demonstration* is “the logical application of (an) established *canon* which will infallibly detect the immediate causative antecedent of an effect, amidst the apparent antecedents.” Ibid. The inductive logic has this “value:....that when once the discovery (of the causative antecedent) is clearly made, even in one instance of sequence, we have a particular *law of nature*, a principle, which is a constant and permanent guide of our knowledge and practice.” Ibid. We know this “because.....the great truth reigns in nature: ‘Like causes like effects’.....(which) reason has evolved to itself, (i.e.) the intuitive idea of *efficient power* in causes. I have shown you, that the valid application of those *canons* is, *in each step a syllogism* (i.e. the inductive logic is that branch of the deductive logic of Aristotle).....(in) which the great primary law of causation is (the) first premise.....Few words are needed to show the intimate relations between the true doctrine of causation and theology.....the argument.....for God's existence is founded expressly on this great law of cause.” Ibid. James Buchanan concurs, remarking: “The ground-principle of Natural Theology is the fundamental axiom of *Causation*, applied to the explanation of the phenomena of nature. It stands connected, and is, in fact, identical, with the principle on which we attain to the knowledge of other beings, as well as to that of God.” Faith in God and Modern Atheism Compared, Volume 1, page 330, Johnstone, Hunter, and Co., Edinburgh, and Hamilton Adams, and Co., London, 1864

## CONCLUSION

I would bring this discussion to a close by briefly highlighting some of its major features.

1. To understand Van Til we must remember that his proposal was to bring Amsterdam and Princeton together, with a weighted preference in Amsterdam's direction. Deceptive subtlety and contradiction are the constant result. He says the non-Christian does not know, and yet does know, and this with a reason vitiated to all 'true' knowledge, according to his theory. This feature is a recurring theme.

2. Another thread running continuously through his system is a failure to distinguish matters that are truly different. Such are:

(a) The grace-nature (heavenly and earthly) distinction. Please note: We do not support Roman Catholicism's misuse of this distinction, when they apply it to original sin in order to justify in effect, a semi-Pelagian view of the will of man.

(b) The distinction between the *involuntary* powers of primary judgment and *chosen* theoretical perspectives. Van Til confuses both in his *presuppositional* theory, and ignores or denies the fact that there is an impartial open-minded process of right reason available to both non-Christians and Christians.

(c) The distinction between *theoretical* judgments of the reason and its *practical* judgments. The failure to make this distinction has the effect of obscuring the simple experimental nature of the Christian faith, based upon straightforward doctrine. Christianity is made philosophical instead.

(d) The differences between unbelievers: all are made into one autonomous man: "In terms of this presupposition of human autonomy Paul, the Pharisee, had together with the Greeks, assumed that the world of space-time had not been created by God and was not being brought to its consummation by the overruling providence of God." Toward a Reformed Apologetic, pages 18-19.

What Van Til says may be true of outrageous speculative atheists, but not all men are such. The Pharisees and the Greeks the same in rejecting creation and providence! The Pharisees are not chargeable with this, and the Greeks had no way of knowing the true doctrine of creation; also Plato among the Greeks, recognised the divine providence.

(e) 'Description is explanation.'

(f) Concerning the teaching of Scripture we are now told that, "Interpretation and application are the same." Banner of Truth Magazine, No. 153, page 27, June 1976.

(g) Denial of the distinction between the knowledge of God not unto salvation, and the knowledge of God unto salvation.

(f) God and human reason, with the attendant danger of pantheism.

This unifying process in Van Til, blurring distinctions, with his transcendentalist and idealist leanings, is Platonist and links him with the German idealists, in his philosophical thrust.

3. We have noticed his use of Kantian terminology in the heads of his system with the consequent dangers to theology and philosophy. There is also the pre-occupation with philosophical questions because of his focus upon the infelicitous Kuyperian statement of the effect of sin upon the human intellect, rather than considering sin's principal effect upon the heart.

4. We do not accept that Calvin supports him. Van Til recognises this up to a point, because, as he admits, Calvin maintains the heavenly-earthly distinction, and the ability of the worldly in earthly pursuits.

5. The English Puritan divines of the Westminster period, building on the foundations Calvin laid, himself drawing them from earlier sources, support the British-American theologians up to Warfield, and not Van Til.

The laws of thought and rules of right reason are the same for all men. It is a measure of the freedom (autonomy) granted to men by God, essential to our rational responsibility, that God has left men free to seek out derived truth, including the study of philosophy, and the interpretation of Scripture. It is a sign of our finiteness that we have to use investigation and the processes of reason, with contemplation, to find truth. Dogmatic assertion and the overtly unfriendly attitude of Kuyperianism towards unbelievers is against the spirit of the gospel, and contains overtones of intolerance.

Finally, by way of simplification, this discussion may be seen as an example of the observation that "Some men are born Platonists (mystical and unifying, dogmatic and authoritarian) and others Aristotelian (analytical, with examination in detail, and cautious drawing of conclusions)." Classical Greece, by C. M. Bowra and the Editors of TIME-LIFE Books, page 140, TIME-LIFE INTERNATIONAL, 1996. In Thornwell's words Plato and Aristotle represent, "The opposite poles of human thought, between which *speculation has continued ever since to oscillate* (emphasis mine)." Life and Letters of Thornwell, page 536.

Indeed: "The thing that has been, it is that which shall be: and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." Ecclesiastes 1: 9.

## APPENDIX—JAMES BUCHANAN’S TESTIMONY

A thorough and completely orthodox and scriptural discussion of Apologetics can be found in James Buchanan’s Faith in God and Modern Atheism Compared, in two volumes currently out of print, referred to above, see page 86. A couple of excerpts point to yet another not insignificant source in favour of our position.

### Faith and Reason

“The term *faith*.....may signify either,—the disposition to repose trust in our mental faculties (whether renewed or unrenewed by saving grace), which is not necessarily opposed to Reason, but only to Scepticism; or the disposition to believe on the testimony or authority of Scripture, which can only be vindicated when Reason is convinced of the claims of Revelation.—A legitimate faith is in no case at variance with the dictates of enlightened reason; and the two should never be contrasted, as rivals or antagonists, since in point of fact, they are allies in the same sacred cause.—Least of all should they be contradistinguished or disjoined in treating of the fundamental article of Religion,—the existence of God as the Creator and Governor of the world,—for, in so far as regards the *natural evidence* of that truth, there can be no legitimate faith without the exercise of reason in examining, comparing, and judging of the facts (of Creation as existing and displaying manifold examples of Divine design, of the exercise of conscience, and of the observation of man’s nature as religious), which constitute the substance of that evidence; and in so far as regards the testimony or authority of Scripture, the exercise of reason is equally indispensable. In the exquisite words of Vinet, as reported by the lamented John Mackintosh, ‘*La foi a sa raison, et la raison a sa foi.*’” Op. Cit. Volume 1, page 328.

### Van Til’s Position is not Original

James Buchanan has focussed critically upon the apologetical work of W. I. Irons, On the Whole Doctrine of Final Causes, which states a position virtually identical to that of Van Til.

“Mr Irons does not, indeed, deny that ‘there is design in nature, and that God is the author of it,’ but holds that it cannot be discerned by human reason without the light of Revelation, and that ‘the believer in Revelation alone has any right to entertain the doctrine of design.’ The whole object of his book is to ‘set forth, in the clearest manner, that though atheism is an impossibility, and irreligion misery, yet that man, by his unassisted natural powers, could never have certainly determined any one truth of theology or religion.’ What is the precise import of this statement? Does it mean that while ‘there *is* design in nature, and God is the author of it,’ yet man is unable, by his unassisted natural powers, to discern that design, or to deduce from it any valid proof of the being and perfections of God? Then how, on that supposition, can it be said that ‘Atheism is an impossibility?’ or that ‘the believer in Revelation alone has any right to entertain the doctrine of design?’ Without a Revelation, Atheism would seem, on his showing, to be inevitable, and of course innocent: and even with a Revelation, it might seem difficult to say how the believer himself could draw *from the works* of nature any proof of the Divine Being and Perfections; so that this belief must rest

*solely* on the ground of authority, unless, indeed, Revelation be supposed to confer a new faculty of intellectual perception and inference, which enables man to discern design, always existing in nature but hitherto undiscovered, and to deduce conclusions from it which were undiscoverable before.—Or does the statement mean merely, that ‘while there *is* design in nature, and God is the author of it,’ man never did, *in point of fact*, make the discovery of God’s Being from the study of His works, without the concurrent light of Revelation, either shining direct on those to whom it was vouchsafed, or transmitted partially through the obscure medium of oral tradition? Then how, on this supposition, can his doctrine be supposed to be at variance with that of Paley and all other Christian writers, who have unanimously concurred in the belief of a primeval Revelation, unless it be intended to affirm further, that man has no capacity to infer from the works of nature the existence of its Author, even after a Revelation has been given?

“Mr Irons (as Van Til) seems to labour under a superfluous and somewhat morbid jealousy for the honour of Revelation. In so far as the *a posteriori* argument is concerned, he would teach Reason to know and to keep its own place. ‘I would have the Deist left to his own Theological resources, that the futility of his attempts might show him the necessity of a Revelation. I would prove that a strictly Natural Theology is unattainable; so that all men who feel that some Theology is indispensable may be unable to avoid the conclusion in favour of Revelation.’ But can ‘the necessity of Revelation’ be established on no better ground than that which may be found amidst the crumbling ruins of ‘the argument from design?’ or if that argument be inept and inconclusive, to what higher or surer evidence can Revelation itself appeal? Perhaps there may be a quicker, a more intuitive perception, which supersedes argument in *both* cases, ‘an act of pure reason,’ see W. I. Irons, Dissertation, page 193, which is *a priori*, and, as such, exclusive of all reasoning: and for this reason, apparently, Mr Irons undertakes to ‘vindicate the position that the truths of Revelation are eternal necessary truths of Reason, spiritually discerned, i.e. not cognisable by sense.’—Suppose they were,—which we are very far, however, from admitting,—what then? Why, that the existence, providence, and government of God, which are revealed in Scripture, ought to be regarded as ‘eternal and necessary truths of Reason,’ in common, however, with the more peculiar doctrines of Revelation,—*mediation, atonement, regeneration, repentance, and faith*; and thus the domain of Reason, so far from being curtailed, is extended, so as to embrace every thing that is usually supposed to rest on the authority of Revelation!

“The Atheist (Holyoake in that day and others in our day) gladly accepts, and freely quotes, his (Irons’ and in our day Van Til’s) testimony *against* Natural Theology, but leaves him in undisputed possession of the ‘eternal and necessary truths of Reason,—not cognisable by sense.’ See Holyoake’s Paley Refuted, page 37.” Ibid. Pages 363-365.