

VAN TIL'S APOLOGETIC

READINGS AND ANALYSIS

Greg L. Bahnsen



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 1998 by the Cornelius Van Til Committee

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

For a complete listing of Greg L. Bahnsen's books, articles, and tapes, contact Covenant Media Foundation, 4425 Jefferson Avenue, Suite 108, Texarkana, AR 71854-1529. Phone: 1-800-553-3938.

Printed in the United States of America

Composition by Colophon Typesetting

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bahnsen, Greg L.

Van Til's apologetic : readings and analysis / Greg L. Bahnsen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-098-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-098-8

1. Apologetics. 2. Van Til, Cornelius, 1895–1987—Contributions in apologetics. 3. Apologetics—History—20th century. 4. Reformed Church—Apologetic works. I. Title.

BT1102.B214 1998

239'.092—dc21

98–23866

To DAVID

*truly a “beloved” son
whose birth brightened graduate school days—
may the words of his namesake guide his every thought:
“In Thy light shall we see light” (Ps. 36:9).*

Contents

<i>Analytical Outline</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	xv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
1. An Introduction to Van Til's Apologetic	1
2. The Task of Apologetics	27
3. A Simple Summary and Illustration	88
4. The Epistemological Side of Apologetics	144
5. The Apologetical Side of Epistemology	261
6. The Psychological Complexities of Unbelief	405
7. The Presuppositional Apologetical Argument	461
8. Comparisons and Criticisms of Apologetical Methods	530
9. Concluding Summary: How to Defend the Faith	698
<i>Bibliography of Van Til's Works Cited</i>	735
<i>Index of Scripture</i>	741
<i>Index of Names</i>	745
<i>Index of Subjects</i>	751

Analytical Outline

In the outline below, numbered entries list the chapter sections, and indented entries are the reading selections from the writings of Van Til.

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Van Til's Apologetic	1
1.1 A Question of Ultimate Commitment	1
1.2 An Epistemologically Self-Conscious Apologetic	3
1.3 Arguing from the Impossibility of the Contrary	4
1.4 Cornelius Van Til	7
<i>A Personal Testimony: Total Surrender</i>	20
<i>Presenting Christ Without Compromise</i>	22
<i>A Consistently Reformed Apologetic</i>	23
<i>The All-Encompassing Challenge</i>	25
Chapter 2: The Task of Apologetics	27
2.1 The Nature and Necessity of Apologetics	27
<i>Apologetics Defends Christianity Taken as a Whole</i>	34
<i>Both Apologetics and Evidences Vindicate Christian Theism</i>	36
<i>Apologetics Provides a Basic Method for Answering Every Challenge</i>	38
<i>Apologetics Should Be Pursued in a Learned Fashion</i>	39
<i>Apologetical Reasoning with the Unbeliever Is Not Useless</i>	42
2.2 The Relationship of Apologetics to Theology, Evangelism, and Philosophy	43
<i>Apologetics and Theology Are Interdependent</i>	55
<i>Theology and Philosophy Cannot Be Sharply Separated</i>	56
<i>Different Ways of Speaking: Theology, Philosophy, Apologetics, Witnessing</i>	57
<i>Christian Commitment Involves a Distinctive Method of Knowing</i>	62
<i>Reason and Faith Are Both United in Covenantal Submission to Scripture</i>	64
<i>In the Intellectual Battle, Apologetics Coordinates and Forewarns</i>	67

2.3 The Aim of Apologetics	69
<i>Fideism (Both Experiential and Evidential) Repudiated</i>	77
<i>The Goal of Objective, Absolutely Certain Proof</i>	78
<i>The Gospel as an Intellectual Challenge</i>	82
Chapter 3: A Simple Summary and Illustration	88
3.1 Apologetics as a Conflict Between Final Authorities	90
<i>Different Final Courts of Appeal</i>	95
<i>Man Not an Autonomous Authority</i>	100
3.2 An Implicit Clash of Entire Worldviews (Thus Methods Too)	101
<i>Total Pictures of Life, Reality, and Method</i>	104
<i>Conflicting Theories of Reason and Evidence</i>	106
3.3 The Refutation of the Unbeliever's Presuppositions	107
<i>The Only Rational Faith</i>	115
<i>Chance Cannot Provide a Criterion</i>	116
<i>Precluding Christianity Is to Preclude Justifiable Order</i>	118
<i>Appealing to the Unbeliever's Better Knowledge</i>	119
3.4 An Example of Presuppositional Proof of Christianity	120
<i>Why I Believe in God</i>	121
Chapter 4: The Epistemological Side of Apologetics	144
4.1 Apologetics as Epistemological Disagreement	144
<i>Neutrality as Antitheistic</i>	148
<i>Reason as a Tool, Not an Abstract Judge</i>	154
<i>The Intellectual Is Itself Ethical</i>	156
4.2 Knowing as Having Belief, Truth, and Evidence	158
<i>Revelational Epistemology</i>	165
4.3 The Inescapable Knowledge of God in Nature	177
<i>Even Professing Atheists Clearly Know That God Exists</i>	186
<i>Natural Revelation Distinguished from Natural Theology</i>	192
4.4 The Redemptive, Self-Attesting Revelation of God in Scripture	194
<i>Verbal Revelation Naturally United with Natural</i>	203
<i>The Mind, Not Now Normal, Needs Regeneration</i>	204
<i>Redemptive Revelation Needed to Read Nature Rightly</i>	208
<i>Scripture Carries Its Own Evidence in Itself</i>	209
<i>Natural and Supernatural Revelation Self-Attesting</i>	212
4.5 Thinking God's Thoughts After Him	220
<i>God's Mind Is Incomprehensible</i>	246
<i>Man Knows Analogously to God's Knowing</i>	250
<i>Rational and Empirical Knowledge Affirmed</i>	259

Chapter 5: The Apologetical Side of Epistemology	261
5.1 Epistemological Disagreements Entail Worldview Debate	261
<i>Entire Systems in Opposition</i>	268
<i>Atomistic Apologetics a Mistake</i>	269
5.2 The Antithesis in Attitude and Outlook	272
<i>Christianity in Conflict</i>	287
<i>No Commonality Without Qualification</i>	292
<i>Religious Antithesis Even Affects the Study of Nature</i>	295
<i>The Disagreement in "Systems" Is in Principle and All-Inclusive</i>	300
<i>Two Mutually Exclusive Principles of Interpretation</i>	302
<i>Agreements Are Possible, but Incidental and Peripheral</i>	303
<i>Differing Versions of Objectivity</i>	304
<i>Some Systematically Basic Points of Disagreement</i>	307
<i>Logically Incompatible Assumptions</i>	309
5.3 The Epistemological Failure of Unbelief	311
<i>Ancient Idealism: Plato</i>	318
<i>Ancient Empiricism: Aristotle</i>	329
<i>Modern Rationalism and Empiricism</i>	334
<i>Resultant Skepticism: Hume</i>	337
<i>Critical Philosophy: Kant</i>	343
<i>Recent Idealism</i>	359
<i>Recent Empiricism: Logical Positivism</i>	366
<i>Brute Facts Are Mute Facts</i>	376
<i>The Open-Closed Universe</i>	379
<i>Tension Between Internal Rationality and External Acts</i>	382
<i>Degeneration into Phenomenalism and the Impossibility of a Rational System</i>	385
<i>Autonomy's Rational-Irrational Treaty, Regardless of Its Mutually Destructive Internal Tension</i>	389
<i>The Condemning Testimony of the History of Philosophy</i>	402
Chapter 6: The Psychological Complexities of Unbelief	405
6.1 Speaking Epistemologically, Speaking Psychologically	405
6.2 The Unbeliever's Mixed Status (Which Is Awkward to Articulate)	410
<i>The Antithesis Cannot Be Unqualified</i>	416
<i>The Antithesis Is "in Principle"</i>	417
<i>Metaphysical Common Ground and Psychologically Common Knowledge</i>	418
<i>Yet No Epistemologically Self-Conscious Common Notions</i>	420

6.3 Common Grace Does Not Dilute the Apologetical Challenge	424
<i>Common Favor and Sincere Invitation</i>	426
<i>Avoiding Opposite Extremes Regarding Common Grace</i>	429
<i>Masselink's Twilight Zone</i>	431
<i>Cooperation Between Advocates of Conflicting Worldviews</i>	433
<i>Common Grace Leads Not to Natural Theology but to a Call for Repentance</i>	433
6.4 Intellectual Affinity and Rapport	436
<i>An Ever Present Point of Contact</i>	438
6.5 Unbelievers Suppress the Truth, and Thus Work with Two Mind-Sets	442
<i>Possessing Yet Suppressing the Truth</i>	453
<i>Suppression by Choice, but Unsuccessful</i>	454
<i>God's Revelation of Grace Likewise Suppressed</i>	455
<i>Unbelievers Know and Yet Do Not Know</i>	456
<i>Unbelievers Inconsistently Rely upon Believing Presuppositions</i>	458
Chapter 7: The Presuppositional Apologetical Argument	461
7.1 Presuppositions Are the Crux	461
<i>Presuppositions as One's Basic Guiding Point of Reference</i>	467
<i>Christianity Not One Hypothesis Among Many</i>	468
7.2 The Need to Argue over Contrary Epistemologies	469
<i>The Necessity of Reasoning, Despite Contrary Presuppositions</i>	472
<i>Prodding the "Epistemological Loafers"</i>	476
<i>The Closed-Mindedness of Agnosticism</i>	478
7.3 How to Prove One's Presuppositions: Indirectly	482
<i>Reducing the Non-Christian's Presuppositions to Absurdity</i>	489
<i>The Two-Step Procedure in Apologetics</i>	495
7.4 The Transcendental Nature of Presuppositional Argument	496
<i>The Meaning of "Transcendental" Method</i>	516
<i>A Sample</i>	520
<i>Reasoning by Presupposition</i>	523
Chapter 8: Comparisons and Criticisms of Apologetical Methods	530
8.1 Departure from the "Traditional" Method	530
<i>Key Point: Method Must Match Content</i>	551
<i>A Distinctively Reformed Method</i>	552
<i>Defective Theology Begets Weak Apologetics</i>	552
<i>Weakened by "Foreign Elements"</i>	556
<i>Concessions to Autonomy in Apologetical Method</i>	561
<i>The Discrepancy in Methods: Carnell and Van Til</i>	565

<i>The Traditional Method's Compromises and Defeat</i>		
<i>Illustrated: The Dialogue of Mr. White, Mr. Black,</i>		
<i>and Mr. Grey</i>		572
8.2	Agreeing and Disagreeing with Warfield and Kuyper	596
	<i>Kuyper's Strength and Weakness</i>	600
	<i>Warfield's Strength and Weakness</i>	605
	<i>Combined Strengths Yield the Presuppositional Challenge</i>	610
8.3	Theistic Proofs: Traditional or Presuppositional?	613
	<i>Reasoning from Nature to Nature's God</i>	622
	<i>Problems with the Traditional Proofs</i>	627
8.4	Evidences: Traditional or Presuppositional?	634
	<i>Butler's Method Compromising and Self-Frustrating</i>	648
	<i>Historical Apologetics and Circular Reasoning</i>	650
	<i>Problems with the Traditional Resurrection Argument</i>	652
	<i>Reply to Pinnock's Evidentialist Criticism</i>	654
	<i>Reply to Montgomery's Inductivist Criticism</i>	656
8.5	Van Til's Critics	662
	<i>Evaluation of a Calvinist Critic: Gordon H. Clark</i>	677
	<i>Response to an Anti-Calvinist Critic: Stuart C. Hackett</i>	685
Chapter 9: Concluding Summary: How to Defend the Faith		698
9.1	Recapitulation	698
9.2	A Quick Read of Van Til by Key Themes	702
	<i>The Impossibility of Neutrality</i>	702
	<i>Unbelievers Always Aim to Preserve Their Autonomy</i>	704
	<i>A Blockhouse Method of Defense Ineffective</i>	708
	<i>Two Mutually Exclusive Positions, Only One Hope</i>	
	<i>for Meaning and Rationality</i>	709
	<i>Man Always in Need of God's Special Revelation</i>	712
	<i>Regardless of Apparent Biblical Problems</i>	713
	<i>The Presuppositional Method of Defending the Faith</i>	715
9.3	Van Til's Guidelines for the Presuppositional Method	719
	<i>Fourteen Points on the Interplay of Natural and</i>	
	<i>Special Revelation as They Bear on the Relation</i>	
	<i>Between Believer and Unbeliever</i>	719
	<i>Five Most Important Matters About Argumentation</i>	726
9.4	Van Til's Most Succinct Synopsis	727
	<i>The Total Picture</i>	727
9.5	The Issue of Success in Apologetics	730
	<i>Humbly, Boldly Reasoning with the Willfully Blind</i>	730
	<i>The Covenantal Work of Apologetics: Blessing and Curse</i>	732

Foreword

Some years before his death (in 1987), Dr. Van Til asked several colleagues and friends to watch over the legacy left by his writings. In partial response to that request, this informal Van Til Committee decided to sponsor two projects: a Van Til reader of major size and an extensive bibliography of his writings. Over the years changes have occurred in the composition of the committee, but its purpose and these goals have remained the same.

The concern for a comprehensive bibliographic tool has been realized, entirely outside the oversight of our committee, by Eric Sigward in his producing *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895–1987*, CD-ROM (New York: Labels Army Co., 1997). Many are indebted to Mr. Sigward for this valuable result of his tireless and self-sacrificing efforts, including the almost limitless search possibilities it affords.

The idea for this reader came from the late Greg Bahnsen himself. When he approached our committee a number of years ago, we were delighted not only with his concept of the shape the reader should take but with Dr. Bahnsen's interest in writing it. We believed him eminently, even uniquely, qualified among Dr. Van Til's former students for the task. Dr. Bahnsen's busy schedule and difficult health delayed the book's appearance, but we are grateful that he was able to complete the manuscript shortly before his untimely death in December 1995.

Our thanks to Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing for its commitment to this project and to Dr. James W. Scott for his editorial assistance.

Van Til, we believe, was a remarkable gift to the church. His thought continues to have unprecedented value for strengthening the church in its commitment to the whole counsel of God and for advancing its mission in the world. Our confident expectation is that this volume will prove effective both as an introduction to that thought and for promoting a deepening understanding of it.

For the Van Til Committee
Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.
K. Scott Oliphint

Preface

Generations of maturing Christian pastors and scholars have benefited from the biblical fervor and intellectual rigor of Cornelius Van Til's teaching and writing, particularly in the field of apologetics (defense of the faith). It is my hope that the present volume will help further generations to share in the philosophical profundity and transforming power of Van Til's thought.

A few things initially stand in the way of their doing so. The *first* is that Van Til authored a massive amount of material (some 30 books and syllabi, and over 220 articles, pamphlets, and reviews).¹ Nevertheless, no particular publication expounds the essentials of his presuppositional method in one place systematically, pointedly, and with topical clarity. Even his key book, *The Defense of the Faith*,² is at many

1. The writings of Van Til, both published and unpublished, have been collected in the CD-ROM entitled *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. Eric Sigward (New York: Labels Army Co., 1997).
2. Included in *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955) are sections from the syllabi *Apologetics* (1947, 1953), *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (1954), and *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (1952), as well as the articles published in the book entitled *Common Grace* (1947), "Nature and Scripture" from *The Infallible Word* (edited by N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946]), a pamphlet *Particularism and Common Grace* (1952), a two-part article replying to J. O. Buswell from *The Bible*

points a compilation of segments of previous syllabi and articles, arranged in a crisscross pattern of topics, rather than a systematic and balanced unfolding of his apologetical approach in a discursive, practical, and readily outlined fashion. Some of the issues covered in it only weakly support the central purpose of the book (e.g., chapter 14, “Common Grace and Existentialism”), while other especially helpful and pertinent discussions are not included (e.g., the analysis of the method of argument with unbelievers in chapter 15 of *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*³).

Although he did not accomplish all that he would have liked,⁴ Van

Today (1949), and a series of articles on Reformed apologetics in *Torch and Trumpet* (1951–52).

An abridged and revised second edition of *The Defense of the Faith* was published in 1963, and then a third edition (with only minor revisions) in 1967. References within the present book will be to the first edition, because it represents the fullest presentation of Van Til's position. The first edition of 1955 (in hardback) is now difficult to find, however, and so some readers may wish to use the following formula for converting the page references (to the original edition) that are given in the present book into the equivalent page numbers in the third edition:

for pages 24–37, subtract 16
 for pages 40–167, subtract 17
 for pages 171–98, subtract 20
 for pages 240–67, subtract 59
 for pages 303–53, subtract 94
 for pages 358–97, subtract 98

- The material on all other pages in the first edition is omitted in the third edition.
3. Published as vol. 2 of the series *In Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969). According to Van Til's preface, the first edition of this syllabus was written in 1932 under the title *The Metaphysics of Apologetics*. (The work may represent an expansion of Van Til's 1925 Th.M. thesis at Princeton Seminary under C. W. Hodge, Jr. The Van Til Archives at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia contain a manuscript that appears to be from 1929; perhaps it is an early draft of what Van Til identified as the 1932 syllabus.)
 4. Van Til was particularly distressed at the end of his life that he had never produced an exegetical study showing the extensive and necessary biblical support for the presuppositional method: “Apparently I have given occasion for people to think that I am *speculative* or *philosophical* first and *biblical* afterwards. . . . In short, I would like to be more exegetical than I have been. Dr. G. C. Berkouwer was right in pointing to my weakness on this point” (*Toward a Reformed Apologetics* [Philadelphia: privately printed, 1972], 24, 27). This criticism is mentioned in connection with James Daane in *Defense of the Faith*, 214.

It was to meet this expressed need and reinforce Van Til's outlook that the present author produced the syllabus *A Biblical Introduction to Apologetics* (1976). This syllabus is now published in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Texarkana, Ark: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996).

It should be noted, though, that obvious and crucial biblical allusions are scattered throughout many of Van Til's writings (e.g., *Defense of the Faith*, 45, 109, 135,

Til was a prolific writer of syllabi, surveys, articles, and books. The best self-contained summary of his view is “My Credo,” especially the concluding outline (“The Total Picture”).⁵ It is so compact, however, that one must already be familiar with Van Til’s other works to interpret and apply it well. Thus, readers usually need to master a number of Van Til’s writings in order to gain a general understanding of his system of thought.

The *second* obstacle that readers encounter is Van Til’s style of writing. Frequently he used generalizations and passing allusions that presumed a thorough acquaintance with the history and development of Western philosophy, which most readers do not possess. He had a penchant for discussing issues and philosophers with abstract and (sometimes) vaguely worded principles. His surveys and summaries of positions or periods of thought could meander before reaching trenchant insights. His style could have been strengthened by more analytical, discursive, progressive, and precise development of his assessments and conclusions.⁶ The organizing principles and particular expository manner of his longer publications are often of a diverse nature (i.e., hard to follow) or geared to historical surveys and analyses of individuals (which beginning students rarely find suitable). For

-
- 237, 241, 304, 307, 319, etc.; *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969], 42). The biblical underpinnings of his position are noted explicitly in some syllabi (e.g., *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* [1952], which was revised and expanded many times, and finally published as vol. 5 of the series *In Defense of the Faith* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974], 93, 96) and pamphlets (e.g., the opening pages of *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* [London: Tyndale Press, 1950; reprint, Phillipsburg, N.J.: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, 1953], and at various places in *Paul at Athens* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954]). They are also conspicuously displayed in his addresses and sermons (e.g., “Common Grace and Witness-Bearing,” *Torch and Trumpet*, December 1954–January 1955 [reprint, Phillipsburg: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, 1956], republished in *Common Grace and the Gospel* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972, chap. 5]; and *The God of Hope* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978]).
5. In *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 1–21. This is a *Festschrift* commemorating Van Til’s forty years of service as a professor and his seventy-fifth birthday.
6. John Frame notes: “But teaching the process of analysis was not Van Til’s gift. Therefore even today there are many—both friends and enemies of Van Til’s ideas—who have extremely confused notions of what he actually taught. . . . [T]he force of his bold, exciting summaries, illustrations, and exhortation is weakened by inadequate definition, analysis, and argument” (“Cornelius Van Til,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 161).

instance, it is disappointing to find a book entitled *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*⁷ not working through the standard questions pertaining to the nature of knowledge. The book opens with themes of apologetical relevance, then turns to a lengthy and uneven historical survey, and later focuses upon selected individual writers (some of whom were already given such treatment in *The Defense of the Faith*). Likewise, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*⁸ begins with a discussion of Calvinistic apologetic method, and then shifts to a historical survey—of philosophers and theologians—with short synopses at some points and extensive discussions at others.

A *third* hindrance is the actual content of what Van Til has to say. We find it strange to have our natural ways of thinking so thoroughly challenged and reformed. Because of the thorough changes they would require of us, revolutionary insights are often greeted with intellectual inertia—or downright hostility. R. J. Rushdoony was surely on target when he said of Van Til: “His critique is directed to the presuppositions of thought with a radical thoroughness. This fact accounts for the nature of Van Til’s influence: he either reshapes the thinking of those who come within his orbit or incurs their consistent opposition.”⁹

And then, *finally*, there is the ever-present difficulty that people have with thinking abstractly and using the special concepts and vocabulary of philosophy, particularly when Van Til’s own terminology arises from the arcane parlance of a bygone generation of idealistic philosophers (e.g., “principle of individuation,” “limiting concept,” “concrete universal”). This factor is occasionally complicated even further by the novelty of some of Van Til’s own ideas (e.g., common grace as “earlier grace”¹⁰) and his unusual use of terms (e.g., “analogi-

7. This book was based on an earlier syllabus of the same title (1954). Some of its contents appeared in *The Defense of the Faith*.

8. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971. In part, this includes portions of earlier addresses by Van Til from 1961 and 1966.

9. Foreword to Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), viii (omitted in the 1975 printing).

10. See *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), now published (with identical pagination) in the expanded work *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 30, 72, 74, 75, 82–83, 85, 91. The original, longer version of this essay was published in *Proceedings of the Calvinistic Philosophy Club* (1941), and then edited and published as a three-part article, “Common Grace,” in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, vols. 8 (1945): 39–60, 166–200 and 9 (1946): 47–84. Pt. 2 of *Common Grace and the Gospel* adds other relevant papers on the controversy over common grace (from 1951, 1953, 1954, 1966, and 1968), as well as a previously unpublished essay.

cal").¹¹ Sometimes a blessing can be a curse. Van Til was astute in using lively metaphors and illustrations, but sometimes his vivid rhetoric was troublesome to others.¹²

A need exists, therefore, for a volume that, in a supportive fashion, condenses, arranges, and clarifies the wide range of Van Til's writings that touch on apologetics. There is a welcome place for analyses of Van Til's creative and thoughtful contributions to other fields (e.g., theology, ethics, psychology, and history of thought), but the present work focuses specifically on his approach to apologetics.¹³ My aim is to expound the presuppositional method of defending the Christian faith by highlighting and explaining the distinctives of Van Til's thought, providing carefully chosen selections from his body of writings, and taking opportunity to correct certain criticisms that have been voiced. This book, then, is something of an anthology with running commentary.

My hope is to make presuppositionalism readily understandable to readers who want an introductory exposure to Van Til in his own words and who are not specially trained in philosophy, but who are

11. Van Til recognized the trouble he might have caused himself, but also held (correctly, I believe) that opponents who paid attention to his publications should have been able to avoid misreading him so badly. He once wrote: "My main purpose is to seek to remove some misunderstandings that have developed with respect to my views. These misunderstandings may be my own fault, no doubt, in considerable measure. My terminology may sometimes be ambiguous. But I cannot believe that such misconstruction of my view as is now being advertised is fairly found in anything that I have written or said" ("A Letter on Common Grace," in *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 149 [reprinting *Letter on Common Grace* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, 1953]).
12. Perhaps the most famous case was Van Til's colorful application of the point that the Christian's approach to science must not, by means of a defective view of common grace, incorporate into itself the destructive force of autonomous thinking, which denies the revelatory character of all facts in nature and the necessity of God's providence to make scientific procedure intelligible. He said that then "we might as well blow up the science building [at Calvin College] with an atom bomb." In customary humility (and to the amusement of his followers) he later wrote about the hyperbole, "I have apologized for that statement" ("A Letter on Common Grace," in *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 195).
13. For a worthwhile exploration and interaction with the teaching of Van Til on a broader plane than is found here, I recommend John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995). Beyond philosophical and apologetical issues, Frame explores and offers helpful evaluation of Van Til's broader teaching and insights in systematic theology and contemporary theology. With respect more specifically to Van Til's apologetics, Frame has great appreciation for Van Til, but is somewhat more critical than I am. His criticisms related to apologetics have to some degree appeared in previous publications, which I have attempted to address briefly throughout the present text.

willing to read and reflect upon basic issues pertaining to knowledge and Christianity at more than an elementary level. Because this is intended as an introductory exposure, not an advanced text for specialists, it will not delve into deeper or technical philosophical issues pertaining to Van Til's thinking and method, nor will it extensively examine possible ambiguities or difficulties that could benefit from clarification or correction.¹⁴

This book is an organized digest of what Van Til taught throughout his various publications about the underlying approach to apologetics. After an introductory sketch of the basic themes that drive Van Til's apologetic and a survey of his life, the book lays out his conception of apologetics and offers a simple description and illustration of his presuppositional method. We then explore and explain in more detail the relevant epistemological and psychological issues that bear on Van Til's way of defending the faith, culminating in a discussion of the transcendental argumentation that he endorsed—set in contrast to the more traditional way of using theistic proofs and empirical evidences. A few of Van Til's opponents are examined before his outlook is summarized in the conclusion.

It will be beneficial for the reader to stay in touch with, and remain aware of, the flow of thought in the book, especially since certain discussions are somewhat lengthy and the analysis is interspersed with blocks of readings. The progression of thought can be scanned by looking at the development of chapter sections (and the topics of the Van Til readings), which are listed in the analytical outline at the front of the book. I would suggest that the reader can most effectively learn and understand the thrust of Van Til's approach to defending the faith if he keeps referring back to this outline in order to grasp the significance of what he is reading at any particular point within the overall scheme.

Each section begins with a brief discussion of the announced topic. Selected readings from Van Til then follow the introductory discussions; the titles for the excerpts are my own. The readings are accompanied by explanatory commentary or footnotes, transitions, and occasional responses to critics.

14. For an example of an attempt at philosophical strengthening of Van Til's distinctive position, aroused by sympathetic criticism, see my doctoral dissertation "A Conditional Resolution of the Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1978). This is briefly summarized and applied to Van Til in "The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 1–31.

Throughout this book, the quotations and extended readings taken from Van Til's publications (including his quotation of others) will be distinguished from my own comments by the use of a distinctive typeface, an example of which is provided by this sentence. Footnotes within Van Til's text usually provide my own running commentary; "CVT:" introduces his own footnotes. Full bibliographical information on any work written by Van Til is given whenever it first appears in each chapter, as well as in the bibliography at the back of the book.

For ease of reading or greater clarity of thought, I have sometimes taken the editorial liberty of breaking up longer paragraphs in Van Til's material. Also, in readings that combine a number of passages from a particular source, the order of the selected portions has sometimes been changed.¹⁵ On rare occasion, Van Til's wording was slightly changed (or amplified) in a subsequent edition or republication of his work; in such cases I have followed the wording that seems best. A number of proofreading corrections have also been made.

There are many thanks to extend to others who helped me in one way or another in producing this book. I am grateful for the philosophically astute seminary instruction I received from John Frame, which set my feet in the right path for my doctoral studies. Heartfelt thanks go to Richard Gaffin for initiating, encouraging, and patiently waiting for the completion of this project through a number of medical and personal upheavals in my life.

I cannot find adequate expression for my gratitude to Randy and Marinell Booth for the cheerful, willing, and persevering hours of labor that they contributed to the preparation of the manuscript; it could not have been finished without them, and I will always remember their kindness to me. Likewise, my mother, Virginia Bahnsen, always seemed to be standing by, ready to type, check, or help in any way needed. If nominations for sainthood were appropriate in Protestant circles, I would surely promote the names of my hardworking and generous manuscript readers: Lonn Oswalt, Joseph Bell, and my assistant, Michael Butler.

The members of the Board at the Southern California Center for Christian Studies (P.O. Box 328, Placentia, CA 92871) are thanked for granting me the time and opportunity to engage in this writing project—and more generally for all of the administrative and personal

15. In these cases, the footnote reference for the reading selection in question will list the pages for the selected passages in the order in which they are presented here.

support they give to the teaching ministry here. I would also like to express deep gratitude to the session and congregation of Grace Presbyterian Chapel in Orange County, California, for their special financial gift, which kept me off the road (at speaking engagements) and provided a month for finishing the manuscript.

And, finally, although he is now in a better place, I would publicly acknowledge my debt to Cornelius Van Til for the hours of rewarding personal discussion, fellowship, and instruction he shared with me years ago—as well as the gracious confidence he expressed by inviting me, while a student at Westminster Seminary, to assist him in his scholarly labors and lecture in his stead when he was ill. I learned much from his words, as well as from his walk.

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Van Til's Apologetic

1.1 A Question of Ultimate Commitment

“Contentious disputes arise,” wrote John Calvin, “from the fact that many think less honorably than they ought of the greatness of divine wisdom, and are carried away by profane audacity.”¹ Calvin was commenting upon 1 Peter 3:15, a verse that has long been taken as the biblical charter for Christian apologetics. His words were not directed, however, at the “profane audacity” of the *unbeliever* who challenges the existence of God or the veracity of His word, but rather at those Christian *apologists* who fall short of recognizing and submitting to the superiority of God’s wisdom as revealed in the pages of Scripture. Assuming for themselves the self-sufficiency and intellectual pride of autonomy,² they launch into battle with antagonistic unbelievers (who are themselves marked by the same self-sufficiency and intellectual

1. *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, vol. 12, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston (1551; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), at 1 Peter 3:15 (p. 290).

2. “Autonomy” refers to being a law unto oneself, so that one’s thinking is independent of any outside authority, including God’s. Autonomous reasoning takes itself philosophically as the final point of reference and interpretation, the ultimate court of intellectual appeal; it presumes to be self-governing, self-determinative, and self-directing.

pride) with an “audacity” that is “profane”—not befitting those who live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The sorry result, as Calvin knew, is nothing but the kind of contentious disputes that should be shunned by servants of the Lord (2 Tim. 2:23–26).

In the words of 1 Peter 3:15, the personal prerequisite for offering a reasoned defense of the Christian faith is to have “set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts.” Christ must be the ultimate authority over our philosophy, our reasoning, and our argumentation—not just at the end, but at the beginning, of the apologetical endeavor. If we are to “cast down reasonings and every high thing exalted against the knowledge of God,” said Paul, then we must “bring *every* thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).³ An ultimate commitment to Christ covers the entire range of human activity, including every aspect of intellectual endeavor. To reason in a way that does not recognize this is to transgress the first and great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with . . . *all your mind*” (Matt. 22:37). In light of this, our apologetical method, not merely our apologetical conclusions, should be controlled by the word of Jesus Christ.

Very simply, if the apologist is to rid himself of profane audacity, his faith in the greatness of divine wisdom must be championed by means of a procedure that itself honors the same wisdom. After all, in Christ “*all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are deposited” (Col. 2:3). No exception is made for the knowledge by which the Christian defends the knowledge of Christ. This means that the apologist must *presuppose*⁴ the truth of God’s word from start to finish in his apologetic witness. It is only to be expected that, in matters of ultimate commitment, the intended *conclusion* of one’s line of argumentation will also be the presuppositional standard that governs

3. A more appropriate motto for Van Til’s apologetic could hardly be found than the title of Richard Pratt’s practical manual for defending the faith in Van Til’s presuppositional style: *Every Thought Captive* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979). This is a very helpful, elementary book for the “uninitiated” (as Pratt puts it).

4. A “presupposition” is an elementary assumption in one’s reasoning or in the process by which opinions are formed. In this book, a “presupposition” is not just any assumption in an argument, but a personal commitment that is held at the most basic level of one’s network of beliefs. Presuppositions form a wide-ranging, foundational *perspective* (or starting point) in terms of which everything else is interpreted and evaluated. As such, presuppositions have the greatest authority in one’s thinking, being treated as one’s least negotiable beliefs and being granted the highest immunity to revision.

one's manner of argumentation for that conclusion—or else the intended conclusion is not his *ultimate* commitment after all.

The Christian's final standard, the inspired word of God, teaches us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). If the apologist treats the starting point of knowledge as something other than reverence for God, then unconditional submission to the unsurpassed greatness of God's wisdom at the end of his argumentation does not really make sense.⁵ There would always be something greater than God's wisdom—namely, the supposed wisdom of one's intellectual starting point. The word of God would necessarily (logically, if not personally) remain subordinate to that autonomous, final standard.⁶ The situation is pictured well by C. S. Lewis: "The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. . . . The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock."⁷

1.2 An Epistemologically Self-Conscious Apologetic

It has been the genius of Cornelius Van Til's approach to defending the Christian faith to see how entirely inappropriate is the intellectual attitude of putting God in the dock. The spirit of the apostle Paul arouses him: "Rather, who are you, O man, to reply against God?" (Rom. 9:20), and, "Let God be deemed true, though every man is a liar" (Rom. 3:4). Created men, especially as sinful rebels, are in no moral or intellectual position to challenge their sovereign Creator and Lord.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein confessed that a devastating incongruity lay at the heart of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. If he was correct in his eventual conclusion, then the premises used to reach that conclusion were actually meaningless: "Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)" (1921; reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, § 6.54, p. 151). In similar fashion, evangelicals sometimes utilize an autonomous apologetical method. Instead of assuming the authority of Christ, they use that method like a ladder to climb up to acceptance of Christ's claims, only then to "throw the ladder away," since Christ is now seen as having an ultimate authority that conflicts with that method.
6. R. J. Rushdoony has nicely encapsulated this fundamental concern in the title of his book summarizing Van Til's thinking, *By What Standard?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).
7. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

A thoughtless approach to Christian epistemology⁸ which forgets this runs the danger of transgressing God's clear prohibition: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut. 6:16).⁹ Remember the example of Job, who dared to question God and demand answers from Him: "The Lord said to Job: Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? Let him who argues with God answer Him! . . . Would you condemn Me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:1–2, 8). God is not in the dock; we are. His word and character are not questionable; ours are. And, as Van Til was acutely aware, this is not true simply in some narrowly "religious" or moral sense; it applies equally to man's intellectual reasoning (which is an expression of his religious posture).

Our Christian epistemology (or theory of knowledge) should thus be elaborated and worked out in a way that is consistent with its own fundamental principles (or presuppositions), lest it be incoherent and ineffective. Our "method" of knowing is determined by our "message" *as a whole*—thus being influenced by, even as it influences, our convictions about reality (God's existence and nature, and man's nature, relation to God, place in the universe, purpose, etc.). We ought not to espouse one thing theologically, and then practice something else in our general scholarship. One way to say this is to say that Christian scholars and apologists must be thoroughly "self-conscious" about the character of their epistemological position, letting its standards regiment and regulate every detail of their system of beliefs and its application. They always need to form opinions and develop reasoning in light of their fundamental Christian commitments. It has been Van Til's aim to bring this ideal of "epistemological self-consciousness" to bear upon the theory and practice of defending the Christian faith.

1.3 Arguing from the Impossibility of the Contrary

It has been the further genius of Van Til's approach to recognize that an epistemologically self-conscious method of defending the faith is not simply philosophically necessary (given the presuppositional issue) and morally appropriate (given the Creator-creature relation). It also constitutes the strongest intellectual challenge that can be directed to the thinking of the unbeliever. God's revelation is more than

8. Epistemology is the study of the nature and limits of human knowledge; it addresses questions about truth, belief, justification, etc.

9. Notice how Jesus himself, in an apologetical and moral contest with Satan, rested his case on a simple quotation of this stricture from the word of God (Matt. 4:7).

the best foundation for Christian reasoning; it is the only philosophically sound foundation for any reasoning whatsoever. Therefore, although the world in its own wisdom sees the word of Christ as foolishness, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Cor. 1:18, 25). Christians need not sit in an isolated philosophical tower, reduced to simply despising the philosophical systems of non-Christians. No, by taking every thought captive to Christ, we are enabled to cast down reasoning that is exalted against the knowledge of God (cf. 2 Cor. 10:5). We must challenge the unbeliever to give a cogent and credible account of how he knows anything whatsoever, given his espoused presuppositions about reality, truth, and man (his “worldview”).

Van Til’s presuppositional defense of the faith mounts a philosophical offense against the position and reasoning of the non-Christian. Following the inspired lead of the apostle Paul, it rhetorically asks: “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20). This theme is predominant in Van Til’s practice of presuppositional apologetics. The task of the apologist is not simply to show that there is no hope of eternal salvation outside of Christ, but also that the unbeliever has no present intellectual hope outside of Christ. It is foolish for him to build his house on the ruinous sands of human opinion, instead of the verbal rock of Christ (Matt. 7:24–27). He needs to see that those who suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness inescapably “become vain in their reasoning. . . . Professing themselves to be wise, they become fools” (Rom. 1:21–22). Their opposition to the faith amounts to no more than a “knowledge falsely so called” (1 Tim. 6:20–21), by which they actually “oppose themselves” in ignorance (2 Tim. 2:23, 25).

The unbeliever attempts to enlist logic, science, and morality in his debate against the truth of Christianity. Van Til’s apologetic answers these attempts by arguing that only the truth of Christianity can rescue the meaningfulness and cogency of logic, science, and morality. The presuppositional challenge to the unbeliever is guided by the premise that only the Christian worldview provides the philosophical preconditions necessary for man’s reasoning and knowledge in any field whatever. This is what is meant by a “transcendental”¹⁰ defense

10. The term “transcendental” should not be confused with the similar sounding word “transcendent” (an adjective for whatever goes beyond human experience). Transcendental reasoning is concerned to discover what general conditions must be fulfilled for any particular instance of knowledge to be possible; it has been

of Christianity. Upon analysis, all truth drives one to Christ. From beginning to end, man's reasoning about anything whatsoever (even reasoning about reasoning itself) is unintelligible or incoherent unless the truth of the Christian Scriptures is presupposed. Any position contrary to the Christian one, therefore, must be seen as philosophically impossible. It cannot justify its beliefs or offer a worldview whose various elements comport with each other.

In short, presuppositional apologetics argues for the truth of Christianity "from the impossibility of the contrary." Someone who is so foolish as to operate in his intellectual life as though there were no God (Ps. 14:1) thereby "despises wisdom and instruction" and "hates knowledge" (Prov. 1:7, 29). He needs to be answered according to his folly—demonstrating where his philosophical principles lead—"lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Prov. 26:5).

The basic points made in the last three sections of this discussion can now be recapitulated. Christian apologetics is a defense of religious faith, thus pertaining to the question of one's ultimate commitment in life. Apologetics entails intellectual reasoning in justification of one's beliefs, thus touching on the epistemological question of the final standard of knowledge. These observations make clear that the defense of the faith is unavoidably a presuppositional matter. Both the unbeliever and the believer operate in terms of certain espoused presuppositions or worldviews, aiming to develop their thinking in a way that is consistent with their respective ultimate commitments. The Christian apologist needs to argue with the non-Christian in an epistemologically self-conscious manner, which cannot happen if his reasoning and argumentation assume things that are actually contrary to his intended conclusion.

Therefore, the authority of Christ and His word, rather than intellectual autonomy, must govern the starting point and method of his apologetics, as well as its conclusion. He challenges the philosophical adequacy of the unbeliever's worldview, showing how it does

central to the philosophies of secular thinkers such as Aristotle and Kant, and it has become a matter of inquiry in contemporary, analytically minded philosophy. Van Til asks what view of man, mind, truth, language, and the world is necessarily presupposed by our conception of knowledge and our methods of pursuing it. For him, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning—not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from God. This makes Van Til's transcendental criticism of unbelieving thought different from what Herman Dooyeweerd calls "transcendental critique."

not provide the preconditions for the intelligibility of knowledge and morality. His case for Christianity, then, argues from the impossibility of the contrary. From beginning to end, both in his own philosophical method and in what he aims to bring about in the unbeliever's thinking, the Christian apologist reasons in such a way "that in all things Christ might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).

1.4 Cornelius Van Til

The outlook on apologetics that is sketched above was developed, refined, and applied by Cornelius Van Til for over half a century. His consistent adherence to the authority and supreme wisdom of God, infallibly revealed in the Scriptures, led him to promote a presuppositional method of apologetics that not only can forcefully communicate the intellectual challenge of the gospel—both to philosophy professors and to milkmen—but also can do so with humble boldness, rather than the "profane audacity" censured by Calvin. Being steeped in biblical instruction and having mastered the intellectual giants of Western thought, Van Til developed a conception and method of defending the faith which has, in light of the history of previous contributions, amounted to nothing less than "the reformation of Christian apologetics."¹¹

Van Til may not have seemed to be a likely candidate for such an accomplishment, but God is in the habit of utilizing unlikely candidates to mount great victories for His kingdom—think of David and Goliath! Van Til "wanted to be a farmer. . . . Instead he became one of the foremost Christian apologists of our time," to use the words of David E. Kucharsky in *Christianity Today*.¹² Cornelius Van Til (later nicknamed Kees [pronounced "Case"]) was born on May 3, 1895, in a farmhouse in Grootegast, Holland, as the sixth of eight children to a devout dairyman-farmer who worshiped with the Reformed *Afscheiding* party (which had rejected the doctrine of the presumptive regeneration of baptized children). He was Dutch through and through, from wearing wooden shoes ("klompen") to being raised on the Heidelberg Catechism.

11. Greg L. Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, Calif.: Ross House Books, 1976), 191–239.

12. "At the Beginning, God: An Interview with Cornelius Van Til," *Christianity Today* 22 (December 30, 1977): 414.

At the age of ten, in the spring of 1905, his family sailed from Rotterdam to America to join Kees's older brother, Reinder (eleven years older than he), who had found the land amazingly inexpensive. The family settled in Highland, Indiana. Cornelius enjoyed the soil and animals, but he also advanced quickly in school. "Big Klompa" (as his teacher nicknamed him) learned English within a year. With his evident intellectual strengths, he was not to be a cucumber farmer after all. At age nineteen, he came under the conviction that he should become a minister. In 1914 Europe went to war, and Van Til went to Calvin Preparatory School and College, the educational center of the Christian Reformed Church. He worked his way through as a part-time janitor and loved the study of philosophy, at which his mind was adept. By the time he enrolled in Calvin Theological Seminary in 1921, he was already familiar with the works of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck and had added a knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin to his Dutch and English! He studied systematic theology under Louis Berkhof and Christian philosophy under W. H. Jellema.

American Christianity in the 1920s was reacting to the shock waves of theological liberalism, inspired by German higher criticism of the Bible and a Darwinian view of man. At that time, the man who stood head and shoulders above his peers in setting forth a Christianity worthy of scholarly defense was J. Gresham Machen of Princeton Theological Seminary. His forceful answer to one plank in the skeptical view of the New Testament, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, was published during Van Til's first year in seminary. American philosophy in the 1920s was interacting with various responses to Kant's critical philosophy (absolute idealism, personalism, neorealism, and critical realism) and coming under the sway of naturalistic ideologies (pragmatism and positivism). Among the schools of noted academic stature was Princeton University, whose philosophy department was headed by the Scottish personalist, Archibald Allan Bowman (1883–1936).

For his middler year of seminary (1922), Van Til made the difficult decision to transfer to Princeton, where he could study simultaneously at the seminary and the university. During this time, he roomed with John J. de Waard (who was to become a lifelong friend),¹³ managed the student dining club, and lived on the same floor in Alexander Hall with "Das" Machen, who was busy publishing numerous apologetical

13. De Waard was a fellow Dutchman who later entered the Orthodox Presbyterian Church with Van Til. In 1959 Van Til preached de Waard's funeral sermon, which is published in the *Presbyterian Guardian* 28 (1959): 214–15, 222.

studies (including his monumental *Christianity and Liberalism* [1923]). Van Til's seminary adviser, C. W. Hodge, Jr., was a grandson of Charles Hodge and the successor to B. B. Warfield. Van Til profited from the solid biblical instruction of men like Hodge, Robert Dick Wilson, William Park Armstrong, and Oswald T. Allis, but the professor closest to his heart was Geerhardus Vos, the respected Dutch scholar who championed the method of biblical theology to the Reformed community in America. Vos exercised a significant influence upon Van Til's decision to give himself to the academic and ecclesiastical struggles through which Machen would go. (When Vos passed away in 1949, Van Til preached his funeral sermon.)

Van Til wrote the prize-winning student papers for both 1923 (on evil and theodicy) and 1924 (on the will and its theological relations). The seminary granted him a Th.M. in systematic theology in 1925, after which he married his longtime sweetheart, Rena Klooster. At the university, Van Til's prowess in metaphysical analysis and his mastery of Hegelian philosophy gained high praise from A. A. Bowman, who offered him a graduate fellowship.¹⁴ In 1927 the university granted him a Ph.D. in philosophy for a dissertation on "God and the Absolute."¹⁵

Men in the seminary had been keeping an eye on Van Til's work. His first published piece, written at the time he was awarded his mas-

14. Over a decade later, Van Til reviewed two books by A. A. Bowman: *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* and *A Sacramental Universe*. The reviews appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 2 (1939–40): 55–62, 175–84; they were reprinted in *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 91–110. For further reading on Van Til's response to personalism, see *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, In Defense of the Faith, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), chaps. 12–13, and his reviews of Albert C. Knudson's *The Doctrine of God* (in *Christianity Today* [a Presbyterian publication in the 1930s] 1, no. 8 [December 1930]: 10–13), of Edgar Sheffield Brightman's *Is God a Person?* (in *Christianity Today* 3, no. 11 [March 1933]: 7) and *Personality and Religion* (in *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [1936]: 100), and of Ralph Tyler Flewelling's *The Survival of Western Culture* (in *Westminster Theological Journal* 6 [1944]: 221–27), as well as his address "Boston Personalism" (in *The God of Hope* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978], 287–334).
15. Van Til published an article with this same title in the *Evangelical Quarterly* 2 (1930): 358–88. He was particularly an expert in the thought of Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923), a British philosopher who discussed the problem of predication and emphasized the "concrete universal" (i.e., a generalization or unity not so vague or abstract as to suppress the specific qualities and differences within actual experience), and whom Van Til deemed the most advanced and sophisticated idealist of his generation (*Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 189).

For more on Van Til's appraisal of idealism, see *Survey of Christian Epistemol-*

ters degree in theology, had been a review of Alfred North Whitehead's *Religion in the Making*.¹⁶ It clearly exhibited the salient lines of Van Til's presuppositional approach: (a) locating his opponent's crucial presuppositions, (b) criticizing the autonomous attitude that arises from a failure to honor the Creator-creature distinction, (c) exposing the internal and destructive philosophical tensions that attend autonomy, and then (d) setting forth the only viable alternative, biblical Christianity. Van Til's next publication (in 1929) was a review of two works by Bavinck.¹⁷ In it, another famous feature of Van Til's thinking came to expression as he insisted that the propagation and defense of the faith required believers to abandon the impossible notion of a "neutral territory" of truth between believers and unbelievers. By the time of the review's publication, Van Til was back at Princeton as a visiting lecturer.

When J. Gresham Machen declined the chair of apologetics at Princeton Seminary, deciding to remain in the New Testament department, the Board of the seminary was encouraged by William Brenton Greene (1854–1928), the retired professor of apologetics, to invite Van Til to lecture in the department for the 1928–29 academic year. After receiving his doctorate and making his first visit back to the Netherlands in 1927, Van Til had accepted the pastorate of the Christian Reformed Church (about seventy families) in Spring Lake, Michigan, a rural community of about one thousand people, thirty miles from Grand Rapids. Although installed for only a year, he took a leave of absence from the congregation and taught apologetics at Princeton. He impressed everyone so favorably there (even though he was the youngest instructor) that at the end of only one year the Board elected him to assume the Stuart Chair of apologetics and ethics. However, within weeks the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. reorganized Princeton Seminary in such a way that control of the once conservative bastion of Reformed orthodoxy was turned over to men who desired to see many different viewpoints represented at Princeton and who favored a "broad church."

ogy, chap. 11, and his collection of articles and reviews, *Christianity and Idealism*; cf. his "Absolute Idealism," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Jay Green (Wilmington, Del.: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1964), 1:33–34.

16. *Princeton Theological Review* 25 (1927): 336–38. For a later discussion, see Van Til, review of *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 4 (1942): 163–71.

17. *Princeton Theological Review* 27 (1929): 135–36.

Machen resigned and immediately started work to establish Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Van Til likewise resigned and returned to Michigan. During that summer, Van Til's only child, Earl, was born. About the same time, Machen handpicked Van Til to teach apologetics in the new seminary, even traveling with Ned B. Stonehouse to Michigan in August to plead with him to accept the position—after a previous visit from O. T. Allis had not persuaded him.¹⁸ After declining at first, Van Til took up teaching duties at Westminster Seminary in the fall of 1929, where he continued in that ministry until retiring more than forty years later. When Machen was unjustly forced out of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1936, Van Til supported him in the founding of the Presbyterian Church of America (which was soon renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). Along with R. B. Kuiper, he transferred his ministerial credentials from the Christian Reformed Church to the new denomination, where he came to have a decided influence for years to come, both as a scholar and as a powerful pulpit preacher.

From the outset of his teaching career, Van Til sought to develop a distinctively consistent Christian philosophical outlook. He wanted to see everything in terms of a biblical world-and-life view. This was evident already in 1931, when he published articles on “A Christian Theistic Theory of Knowledge” and “A Christian Theistic Theory of Reality.”¹⁹ The first major syllabus produced by Van Til at Westminster Seminary, *The Metaphysics of Apologetics*,²⁰ appeared in 1932. In it he traced various epistemological positions down through history, noting the bearing of metaphysical convictions²¹ upon them, and explained the necessity of a transcendental, presuppositional method of argumentation. He insisted that Christians must reason with unbelievers, seeking to reduce the non-Christian worldview (in whatever

18. This is but one of many indications that Machen and Van Til saw their respective contributions to apologetics as complementing each other, not conflicting. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between Machen's historical defense of the faith and Van Til's presuppositional method, see Greg L. Bahnsen, “Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the O.P.C.,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Denison (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 259–94.

19. *The Banner* 66 (1931): 984, 995; 1032. Van Til begins *The Defense of the Faith* in the same way—with an exposition of the Christian outlook in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

20. This syllabus was subsequently retitled *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*.

21. Metaphysics is the study of the nature, conditions, extent, origin, structure, and

form it takes) to absurdity—by exposing it to be epistemologically and morally self-contradictory. Van Til's insight, a brilliant and apologetically powerful one, was that *antitheism actually presupposes theism*. To reason at all, the unbeliever must operate on assumptions that actually contradict his espoused presuppositions—assumptions that comport only with the Christian worldview. The unbeliever's efforts to be rational and to find an intelligible interpretation of his experience are, then, indications that he bears a knowledge of God the Creator within his heart, though struggling to suppress it (as the Bible itself speaks of sinful man's condition).

By the end of the decade, Van Til had produced major classroom syllabi covering the topics of apologetics, evidences, prolegomena to systematic theology, psychology of religion, ethics, and the (then new) "theology of crisis" of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. In these syllabi, he was particularly adamant that in defending the faith, believers must not artificially separate philosophical apologetics (theism) from empirical evidences (Christianity in particular)—even as systematic theology (positive statement of the truth). These early syllabi were expanded, revised, and reissued many times over nearly half a century.²²

Van Til's presuppositional approach to the defense of the faith has provided a powerful impetus for reform in Christian thinking, one which cuts in two directions. *Outwardly*, it directs a transcendental challenge to all philosophies that fall short of a biblical theory of knowledge, demonstrating that their worldviews do not provide the philosophical preconditions needed for the intelligible use of logic, science, or ethics. In this way, Van Til took the offensive against unbelieving philosophy, offering an internal critique of Plato,²³ Kant,²⁴

relationships of whatever exists (especially that which may be beyond sense experience).

22. Many of these syllabi carried the disclaimer: "This syllabus is for class purposes only, and is not to be regarded as a published book." However, such a statement is surely "difficult of interpretation," since Van Til eventually stopped using the syllabi as a transcription of his lectures for students in class (cf. "for class purposes"), and he himself used important segments of them in his "published books." I interpret Van Til to have meant that the syllabi were like "drafts" along the way to a finished publication someday, thus acknowledging his own desire to possibly recast, explain, illustrate, or revise further if the opportunity afforded itself.

23. E.g., "Plato," *Proceedings of the Calvinistic Philosophy Club*, 1939, 31–44; *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, chap. 3.

24. "Kant or Christ?" *Calvin Forum* 7 (1942): 133–35; *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, chap. 9; *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), chap. 3.

Dewey,²⁵ idealism, personalism, process philosophy,²⁶ etc., and striving to stay abreast of the contemporary philosophical scene.²⁷

Inwardly, Van Til's presuppositional approach calls for self-examination by Christian scholars and apologists to see if their own theories of knowledge have been self-consciously developed in subordination to the word of God which they wish to vindicate or apply. Not surprisingly, then, Van Til's career as a Christian scholar led him into confrontation with a variety of defections from sound theology and a variety of defects in Christian philosophy, whether found in (1) the schools of modern theology, from Barth and Bruner²⁸ to Heidegger, Teilhard, Buber, Ferré, Tillich, Kroner,²⁹ the "God is dead" movement,³⁰ the Confession of 1967,³¹ and the new hermeneutic of Fuchs and Ebeling,³² or (2) the American Pres-

25. Review of *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 3 (1940): 62–73; *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, chap. 9.

26. For references on Van Til's treatment of idealism, personalism, and process thought, see footnotes 14, 15, and 16.

27. E.g., "Recent American Philosophy," *Philosophia Reformata* 2 (1937): 1–24; review of *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, edited by Dagobert Runes, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 6 (1943): 72–80. The relevance of Van Til's presuppositionalism to modern epistemological issues is explored in Greg L. Bahnsen, "Pragmatism, Prejudice and Presuppositionalism," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. North, 241–92.

28. Already in 1935, Van Til had produced a syllabus entitled *Theology of Crisis*, and in 1937 he began publishing articles on neoorthodoxy, beginning with "Karl Barth on Scripture," "Karl Barth on Creation," and "Karl Barth and Historic Christianity," in *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (1937): 137–38, 204–5; 4 (1937): 108–9. Many other articles were to follow throughout Van Til's career (e.g., "Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 16 [1954]: 135–81), but he is especially remembered for the thorough assaults made upon neoorthodoxy in two major publications: *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Bruner* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946; 2d ed., 1947; 3d ed., with five previously published essays on Barth, 1972); and *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962; 2d ed., with four additional essays, 1974).

29. *The Later Heidegger and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1964), reprinted from *Westminster Theological Journal* 26 (1964): 121–61; "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 28 (1966): 109–44; *Christ and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968; cf. previous syllabus, 1965); "From Cornelius Van Til" (a response to Nels F. S. Ferré, "Where Do We Go from Here in Theology?"), *Religion in Life* 25 (1955): 22–28; review of *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, by Paul Tillich, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1957): 93–99; "Religious Philosophy: A Discussion of Richard Kroner's Book *Culture and Faith*," *Calvin Forum* 18 (1953): 126–28; *Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, chap. 4.

30. *Is God Dead?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966).

31. *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967).

32. *The New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974). For fur-

byterian tradition, including past stalwarts such as Charles Hodge,³³ B. B. Warfield,³⁴ and W. B. Greene,³⁵ and more recent figures such as J. Oliver Buswell,³⁶ Gordon Clark,³⁷ Floyd Hamilton,³⁸ and Edward J. Carnell,³⁹ or (3) the teachings (e.g., on common grace⁴⁰) of Dutch Reformed authors in the Netherlands and the United States—such as Kuyper,⁴¹ Bavinck,⁴² Berkouwer,⁴³ Dooyeweerd,⁴⁴

-
- ther discussions of modern theological trends by Van Til, see *The Great Debate Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970) and *The New Synthesis Theology of the Netherlands* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975).
33. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, In *Defense of the Faith*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), chap. 4; *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), chap. 5.
 34. Introduction to *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, by B. B. Warfield (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948); *Defense of the Faith*, chap. 13; *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), chap. 8.
 35. *Defense of the Faith*, chap. 13.
 36. *Ibid.*, chap. 10; *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, chap. 10; *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, appendix; *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, chap. 14.
 37. *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, chaps. 13–14.
 38. *Defense of the Faith*, chap. 13; *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, chap. 9.
 39. Review of *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, by Edward John Carnell, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 11 (1948): 45–53; *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), chaps. 3–4.
 40. Van Til finished his undergraduate course of study at Princeton Seminary in the same year, 1924, as the Christian Reformed Church affirmed its “Three Points” concerning common grace. Of the many things written by Van Til on this subject, note especially his second book, *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947) and the helpful collection of relevant essays, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972).
 41. “Reflections on Dr. A. Kuyper,” *The Banner* 72 (December 16, 1937): 1187; *Defense of the Faith*, chaps. 8, 11, 13; *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, chap. 8.
 42. “Bavinck the Theologian,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 24 (1961): 48–64; *Defense of the Faith*, chaps. 8, 13; *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, chap. 5, where Van Til offers the assessment: “Herman Bavinck has given to us the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times” (p. 43).
 43. *The Sovereignty of Grace: An Appraisal of G. C. Berkouwer’s View of Dordt* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969); *The Triumph of Grace: The Heidelberg Catechism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1958), chap. 6; *The New Synthesis Theology of the Netherlands*, chap. 2.A; and reviews of books by Berkouwer, especially on Barth, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 11 (1948): 77–80; 12 (1949): 74–76; 18 (1955): 58–59.
 44. Review of *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 1, by Herman Dooyeweerd, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 17 (1955): 180–83; response to Dooyeweerd in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 89–127; *Herman Dooyeweerd and Reformed Apologetics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1974); “Biblical Dimensionalism,” in *Christianity in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1962–64), vol. 2, pt. 3, chaps. 8–9.

Vollenhoven,⁴⁵ William Masselink,⁴⁶ and James Daane.⁴⁷

Van Til's prolific work as a teacher and writer goes beyond his constructive and critical contributions in apologetics and Christian philosophy. His presuppositional outlook not only cuts outwardly and inwardly; it has likewise cut a wide swath through a large number of related areas. Van Til produced valuable studies in the area of Christian theology (e.g., on equal ultimacy in the Trinity, absolute predestination, God's incomprehensibility, nature and revelation, theological paradox, and a nonintellectualistic view of man)⁴⁸ and ethics (e.g., on the necessity of the proper goal, motive, and standard).⁴⁹ Van Til's works also addressed intellectual history,⁵⁰ key figures in church history (e.g., Augustine and Calvin),⁵¹ Christian culture,⁵² and the necessity of Christian education.⁵³

45. Reviews in *Calvin Forum* 1 (1936): 142–43 and *Westminster Theological Journal* 14 (1951): 86–87; "Professor Vollenhoven's Significance for Reformed Apologetics," in *Wetenschappelijke Bijdragen*, ed. S. U. Zuidema (Franeker: T. Wever, 1951), 68–71.
46. "Letter on Common Grace" (1953; now published in *Common Grace and the Gospel*); *The Banner* 95, no. 32 (1960); 96, no. 2 (1961); *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, app. 1; *Defense of the Faith*, passim.
47. *The Theology of James Daane* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959); *Defense of the Faith*, passim.
48. *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, passim; *Defense of the Faith*, chaps. 1–2; *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, In Defense of the Faith, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (1946; reprint, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 255–93; "The Significance of Dort for Today," in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 181–96 (expanded in *Sovereignty of Grace*). Cf. John M. Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. North, 295–330.
49. *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1940, 1947; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, 1952), In Defense of the Faith, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974).
50. E.g., *Christianity in Conflict*; *Who Do You Say That I Am?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975).
51. *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, chap. 4; *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, chap. 4; "Calvin and Modern Subjectivism" and "Calvin as a Controversialist," *Torch and Trumpet* 9, no. 3 (1959): 5–9, and no. 4 (1959): 14–16.
52. E.g., "Calvinism and Art," *Presbyterian Guardian* 17 (1948): 272–74; "The Full-Orbed Life," in *Fundamentals in Christian Education*, ed. Cornelius Jaarsma (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 157–70; reprinted in *Essays on Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), a collection of relevant articles from 1930 to 1969.
53. *Essays on Christian Education*; "What Shall We Feed Our Children?" *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (1936): 23–24; "The Education of Man—A Divinely Ordained Need," in *Fundamentals in Christian Education*, ed. Jaarsma, 39–59.

So, then, the distinctive presuppositional method and outlook that Van Til promoted through his published writings have generated an intellectual revolution. Its impact has been felt outwardly (in the transcendental challenge to all unbelieving scholarship), inwardly (in the demand that Christian scholarship be developed in a way that is faithful to its ultimate commitments), and widely (in its relevance to numerous areas of life and study). By God's providence, Van Til himself, as an individual, personally exerted a wide influence within the Christian world.

In 1938 Van Til was appointed honorary professor at the University of Debrecen in Hungary, the oldest Reformed institution in Europe. (Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia stranded Van Til in Amsterdam, preventing him from reaching Budapest to deliver his acceptance speech.) Throughout his time at Westminster Seminary, numerous students from the Orient (especially Korea, Taiwan, and Japan) came to consolidate their understanding of the Reformed faith under his tutelage.

Many well-known Christian scholars and teachers in America studied under Van Til, including the popular apologists Edward J. Carnell and Francis Schaeffer.⁵⁴ During his career, Van Til also dealt in

54. Both of these men advanced their own versions of "presuppositional" apologetics, versions which miss the transcendental challenge of Van Til's outlook. Carnell treated the Christian worldview as a hypothesis (one among many) to be tested according to "synoptic" standards (e.g., coherence, historical veracity, and personal satisfaction) which are (mistakenly) taken as intelligible apart from—and thus more philosophically basic or authoritative than—the Christian worldview (*Introduction to Christian Apologetics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], chap. 5, also pp. 41, 59, 61, 70, 72–73, 97, 99, 102, 106–7, 117, 119, 154, 164, 173–75, 178–79, 214ff., 268–69; *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], 30, 31, 40, 106, 183, 185, 187, 270–73, 307, 321, 446, 449, 474, 495, 512ff.; *Christian Commitment* [New York: Macmillan, 1957], 76, 78, 101–3, 127, 133, 138, 142, 152, 198, 286, 287). Carnell wrote: "In the contest of hypothesis-making . . . the winner [is] he who can produce the best set of assumptions to account for the totality of reality. . . . Bring on your revelations! Let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of history, and they will deserve a rational man's assent" (*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, 94, 178). In Thomistic fashion, he insisted: "First we must know in order that we might believe" (*Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, 515; cf. p. 260).

Similarly, Francis Schaeffer treated a "presupposition" as merely a hypothesis to be tested over against competing presuppositions by the standard of observational experience (apparently taking this experience as presuppositionally neutral and rationally intelligible apart from the Christian worldview): "What I urge people to do is to consider the two great presuppositions . . . and to consider which of these fits the facts of what is. . . . It is a question of which of these two sets of presuppositions really and empirically meets the facts as we look about us in the

a critical fashion with the apologists J. Oliver Buswell (an inductivist) and Gordon Clark (a deductivist),⁵⁵ both of whom were at one time ministers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In the mid-1930s, Buswell left that communion, subsequently taking issue with Van Til's consistent Calvinism and philosophical presuppositionalism.⁵⁶ In the mid-1940s, Clark became embroiled in ecclesiastical controversy over his views of God's incomprehensibility, the primacy of the intellect, and other matters, eventually leaving the denomination and severely criticizing Van Til's theory of knowledge.⁵⁷

In the 1950s, Van Til debated certain Dutch authors over philosophical issues pertaining to common grace⁵⁸ and God's sover-

world" (*He Is There and He Is Not Silent* [Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1972], 65, 66; cf. p. 81). Schaeffer claimed that religious proof follows "the same rules" as scientific proof (*The God Who Is There* [Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968], 109–11).

55. An "inductive" approach to knowledge begins with the observed particulars and draws generalizations and inferences with probability, whereas a "deductive" approach begins with general (universal) concepts or principles and fits the particular instances to them, drawing inferences with certainty.

56. See, e.g., his articles in *The Bible Today* 42 (1948–49). Van Til's response to Buswell's criticism is referenced in footnote 36 above. Buswell did not recognize that Christian presuppositions (e.g., God's sovereign control over the world to produce uniformity in nature) are philosophically necessary in order to render factual evidences and inductive reasoning intelligible. Since he insisted on developing an epistemology apart from Scripture (in order to test and accept Scripture as a hypothesis), Buswell's epistemology could be as readily reduced to skepticism as the philosophy of the unbeliever with its world of chance (e.g., Hume).

57. See chap. 8.5 below. Clark's own epistemology at first demanded that the Bible be treated as a hypothesis that must pass the test of logical coherence in order to be accepted. See "Special Divine Revelation as Rational," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 37; *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 24–25, 31, 92, 147, 273, 318, 324. He claimed: "The attempt to show the Bible's logical consistency is, I believe, the best method of defending inspiration" ("How May I Know the Bible Is Inspired?" in *Can I Trust My Bible?* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1963], 23).

But Clark later went so far as to deny altogether that knowledge is derived through sense observation—a position that has been easily reduced to skepticism, since one must use one's senses to gain knowledge even from the Bible. See "The Wheaton Lectures," in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 23–122; cf. Ronald Nash, "Gordon Clark's Theory of Knowledge," 125–75. Though sometimes called a presuppositionalist, the later Clark actually treated Christianity as an unprovable, fideistic first axiom, which is merely chosen or posited (*Three Types of Religious Philosophy* [Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1973], 7–8, 104–7, 110). In both his rationalistic and his fideistic phases, Clark fell short of treating the Bible as the highest (self-attesting) authority and as the basis for a transcendental challenge to unbelief.

58. E.g., responding to William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

eignty.⁵⁹ He was invited to become the president of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, but after being pulled back and forth in his mind, he determined to remain in his teaching post at Westminster.

In 1955 he published what would become his most commonly read book for explaining his apologetical system, *The Defense of the Faith*, a reworking and compilation of many previous syllabi and articles that positively presented the presuppositional method and replied to various critics of it. The presuppositional perspective was spread further, not only by the translation of his works by students in many countries, but also through Van Til's personal trips—to the Orient (Tokyo, Taipei, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Seoul) in 1959, and to the Mexican state of Yucatán in 1962.

Those who came to know Van Til personally will testify that he was not only a man of principle and conviction, but also a man of warmth and compassion. His personal warmth and care were clearly manifest in the humor he would use in his lectures, the fact that his home was always open to students and visitors wishing to talk with him (sharing ginger ale and cookies on the porch), his street preaching in New York City, his tender letters of gospel hope to presidents and other public figures, and his continuing walks and evangelistic talks with the nuns who lived behind his home. Those who heard him pray knew of his deep passion for piety.

Testimony to the principled conviction by which he lived was found in Van Til's reluctant, but necessary, call for greater faithfulness even in a fellow scholar (and Dutchman) who was perceived as being closest to his position. In 1959 Herman Dooyeweerd was in America and lectured at Westminster Seminary. Although Van Til had been encouraged by Dooyeweerd's ideas thirty years earlier (when he met him in Amsterdam), he was distressed to see him now unwilling to base his philosophy on an exegesis of the text of Scripture (something Dooyeweerd eventually criticized as arising from Van Til's "typical rationalistic scholastic tendency"⁶⁰). Fidelity to the Reformed faith and

59. E.g., responding to James Daane, *A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

60. Dooyeweerd, "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. Geehan, 74–89. As late as 1962, Van Til was still attempting to read Dooyeweerd optimistically ("in the best possible light"). In vol. 1, pt. 3, of his massive syllabus on the history of apologetics, *Christianity in Conflict*, Van Til wrote, "Dooyeweerd is not asking for an independent philosophy such as would be based on human autonomy. His whole effort is to show that a Christian phi-

the self-attesting authority of Christ in Scripture meant that Van Til was unable to endorse his fellow Dutchman's approach.⁶¹ This parting of the ways was exacerbated in the decade of the 1960s by certain disciples of Dooyeweerd in North America (e.g., the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship), leading to tension between the two schools of thought (even between Van Til and his colleague in the apologetics department at Westminster⁶²).

On the other hand, during and after this period, a number of younger students and teachers who had been nourished by Van Til's presuppositional approach began publishing, teaching, and making their own contribution to Christian scholarship (e.g., R. J. Rushdoony and John Frame). In the 1970s, Van Til was presented with two volumes of essays, honoring his achievement as a theologian and apologist: in 1971, *Jerusalem and Athens* (ed. E. R. Geehan), and in 1976, *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (ed. Gary North).⁶³ In 1972 Van Til

osophy, as well as a Christian theology, must take its basic religious presuppositions from Scripture" (p. 168). This optimism faded as time went on. In the Van Til *Festschrift* (1971), Dooyeweerd accused Van Til of an extreme "rationalism" that claimed "that philosophical ideas are to be *derived* from the supra-natural truths of divine revelation" (p. 81). Van Til replied (in part): "You see then, Dr. Dooyeweerd, that I hold two points about Christian apologetics which apparently you do not hold. In the first place I believe that Christian apologetics, and in particular Reformed apologetics, is not really *transcendental* in its method unless it says *at the outset* of its dialogue with non-believers that the Christian position must be accepted on the authority of the self-identifying Christ of Scripture as the presupposition of human predication in any field" (p. 98).

Van Til's cordiality and humility were evident as he closed this long critical interchange: "But I must stop. I hope that by what I have said in this article, Dr. Dooyeweerd, I am enabling you to have a somewhat more satisfactory insight into my view; as I have, I think, by reading your letter and by rereading a good deal of your writing elsewhere, attained to a more satisfactory insight into your view. I hope this interchange of ideas between us may help others, after us, to listen more humbly to the words of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture in order that they may better bring the word of truth to all men everywhere—all to the praise of our triune God. Soon we shall meet at Jesus' feet" (pp. 126–27).

61. Van Til usually points out that, although there is value in Dooyeweerd's critique of secular systems of thought (especially their pretended autonomy), there is also a dangerous failure in Dooyeweerd's constructive effort, which is to develop a Christian philosophy apart from—and as an intellectual framework for approaching—the Bible's own explicit, verbal teaching.
62. Cf. Robert D. Knudsen, "Progressive and Regressive Tendencies in Christian Apologetics," and Van Til's response, both in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. Geehan, 275–305.
63. For further material on Van Til's life, see the biography by William White, Jr., *Van Til: Defender of the Faith* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1979). Some readers will be disappointed that the book lacks systematic historical detail and analysis, while others will find its personal and impressionistic nature highly readable. The most comprehensive and helpful bibliography of Van Til's publications is the annotated

was named emeritus professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, and in 1976 the seminary named a new lecture hall in his honor.

Rena, his beloved wife of fifty years, passed away in January 1978. A young family came to live with him in his old home in the Philadelphia suburb of Ambler. The last time I saw him (in June 1985), he was pushing one of their children in a stroller and singing gospel hymns. On April 17, 1987, Cornelius Van Til, one of the towering Christian intellectuals of the twentieth century—who could confound scholars and sing to children—joined “all the saints who from their labors rest,” and now hymns God’s praise in heaven’s choir.

*A PERSONAL TESTIMONY: TOTAL SURRENDER*⁶⁴

As Christians we are not, of ourselves, better or wiser than were the Pharisees. Christ has, by his word and by his Spirit, identified himself with us and thereby, at the same time, told us who and what we are. As a Christian I believe first of all in the testimony that Jesus gives of himself and his work. He says he was sent into the world to save his people from their sins. Jesus asks me to do what he asked the Pharisees to do, namely, read the Scriptures in light of this testimony about himself. He has sent his Spirit to dwell in my heart so that I might believe and therefore understand all things to be what he says they are. I have by his Spirit learned to understand something of what Jesus means when he said *I am the way, the truth and the life*. I have learned something of what it means to make my thought captive to the obedience of Christ, being converted anew every day to the realization that I understand no fact aright unless I see it in its proper relation to Christ as Creator-Redeemer of me and my world. I seek his kingdom and its righteousness above all things else. I now know by the testimony of his Spirit with my spirit that my labor is not in vain in the Lord. “I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day” (II Tim. 1:12, NASB). All of my life, my life in my family, my life in my church, my life in society, and my life in my vocation as a minister of the gospel and a teacher of Christian apologetics is unified under the banner *Pro Rege!*⁶⁵ I am not a

work by Eric D. Bristley, *A Guide to the Writings of Cornelius Van Til 1895–1987* (Chicago: Olive Tree Communications, 1995), also available in *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895–1987*, ed. Eric Sigward, CD-ROM (New York: Labels Army Co., 1997).

64. An excerpt from “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. Geehan, 4–5.

65. Abraham Kuyper’s famous slogan, *Pro Rege*—“For the King”—functions as a brief maxim for a thoroughly Christian world-and-life view, where all of our thinking and activity in every area of life is pursued in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ speaking in His word. This theme, coupled with the subsequent allusion (which

hero, but in Christ I am not afraid of what man may do to me. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the ongoing march of victory of the Christ to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given.

Van Til did not consistently develop) to historical optimism regarding God's kingdom in history, characterizes the distinctive "Reconstructionist" extension and application of Van Til's thought. Speaking of the "legacy" of Van Til, John Frame writes: "Van Til's ideas are being taught by various individuals and groups today. The 'theonomists' or Christian reconstructionists . . . are thorough-going Van Tillians in their epistemology" ("Cornelius Van Til," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 167).

As to ethics, Van Til wrote: "We wish to bring out that the real difference between Christian and non-Christian ethics goes much deeper than is often supposed. . . . *There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy.* It was vain to attempt to flee from God and flee to a universe in order to seek eternal law there" (*Christian Theistic Ethics*, 134). "It is this point particularly that makes it necessary for the Christian to maintain without apology and without concession that it is *Scripture, and Scripture alone*, in the light of which all moral questions must be answered" (*Defense of the Faith*, 71). This entails the need for taking our sociopolitical ethics from Scripture, not from a supposed interpretation of "natural law" (cf. Gary North, *Westminster's Confession* [Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991]). "The Old and New Testaments as a unit maintain that God, as man's creator and judge, must naturally set the ideal for man's life. . . . The Biblical *summum bonum* requires the absolute destruction of sin and evil in the individual and in society. . . . We have the further obligation to destroy the consequences of sin in this world as far as we can" (*Defense of the Faith*, 81, 82). In connection with the "internal self-consistency" of God's righteous character as the source of "any justice in a world of sinners," Van Til asserted that the believer "will seek the maintenance of God's laws for men everywhere and at all times, in ways that are themselves in accord with those laws" (*Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 245).

Regarding Augustine, Van Til wrote: "By his magnificent philosophy of history, seen in its totality as the fruit of reflection of God's revelation through Christ in all things, Augustine did point toward a reformation in philosophy and science as well as in theology . . . in the interest of tracing, better than would otherwise be possible, something of the progressive victory of Christ in the world" (*Christianity in Conflict*, vol. 1, pt. 3, 169 [emphasis added]). Van Til taught that, prior to the victory that is certain beyond history's end, we must in the present have the "courage to start with the program of the eradication of evil from God's universe. . . . We are making progress toward our goal" (*Defense of the Faith*, 82). Later he wrote: "Still further I know that Christ saved and saves his church, his people, that they may be a blessing to the world. . . . And it is the *world* that will be saved. Satan and all the powers of hell cannot prevail against the kingdom of heaven that Christ established and is establishing" (*Case for Calvinism*, 133). "According to the teaching of Scripture, in all that happens in the world of 'men and things' Christ is establishing his kingdom as he destroys the kingdom of Satan. . . . By means of this thought-communication God gave man the task of subduing the world. Quite properly this task has been called man's 'cultural mandate' " (*Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, 103).

Nevertheless, Van Til nowhere developed or expressed a particular millennial eschatology (although he did favorably endorse an extensive, exegetical, and explicitly postmillennial tape series expounding the book of Revelation in the "Supplement Catalog" [April 1980] for the Mt. Olive Tape Library). It is probably distorting and reading too much into Van Til's use of the metaphor of "common grace as earlier grace" to make him into a "self-conscious amillennialist" with a progressively pessimistic view of history (contrary to Gary North, *Dominion and*

*PRESENTING CHRIST WITHOUT COMPROMISE*⁶⁶

Throughout, my aim has been to show that it is the historic Reformed Faith alone that can in any adequate way present the claims of Christ to men for their salvation. The Reformed Faith alone does anything like full justice to the cultural and missionary mandates of Christ. The Reformed Faith alone has anything like an adequately stated view of God, of man, and of Christ as the mediator between God and man. It is because the Reformed Faith alone has an essentially sound, because biblical, theology that it alone has anything like a sound, that is biblical, method of challenging the world of unbelief to repentance and faith. . . .

In seeking to follow the example of Paul, Reformed Apologetics needs, above all else, to make clear from the beginning that it is challenging the wisdom of the natural man on the authority of the self-attesting Christ speaking in Scripture. Doing this the Reformed apologist must place himself on the position of his "opponent," the natural man, in order to show him that on the presupposition of human autonomy human predication⁶⁷ cannot even get under way. The fact that it has gotten under way is because the universe is what the Christian, on the authority of Christ, knows it to be. Even to negate

Common Grace [Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987], 80–87; even North notes that Van Til did not give these issues much systematic thought (p. 87 n.). However, in his massive survey and analysis of the history of thought and culture, Van Til certainly had the spirit of reconstruction: "There is then not a square inch of space where, nor a minute of time when, the believer in Christ can withdraw from the responsibility of being a soldier of the cross. . . . Satan must be driven from the field and Christ must rule" (*Christianity in Conflict*, 1:ii).

66. Excerpts from the pamphlet *Toward a Reformed Apologetics* (Philadelphia: privately printed, 1972), 1, 20, 28.

67. "Predication" is the mental or verbal act of attributing or denying a property or characteristic (a "predicate") to a subject—as when someone affirms, "The sky is blue," or "George Washington fought at Valley Forge," or "Driving seventy-five miles per hour is no longer permitted by law."

Predication requires one intelligibly to differentiate and select individual things (particulars), to make sense out of general or abstract concepts (universals, classes, definable sets), and to distinguish them (so as *not* to make them identical) while in some sense *identifying* or relating them to each other. In the ordinary affairs of life, people readily engage in predication without difficulty—until they are called upon to give an analysis or philosophical account of just what it is that they are doing, what it assumes about reality, and how anyone could know.

Van Til would lay down this dialectical challenge: "How do we know that the many do not simply exist as unrelated particulars [so they are disjointed and different experiences so individual as to share nothing objectively in common, whether a nature, law-like tendency, or even a basis for applying the same word to them]? . . . On the other hand, how is it possible that we should obtain a unity that does not destroy the particulars [strip the particulars of their particularity]?" (*Defense of the Faith*, 42).

Christ, those who hate Him must be borne up by Him. A three year old child may slap its father in his face only because the father holds it up on his knee. . . .

Finally, it is my hope for the future, as it has always been my hope in the past, that I may present Christ without compromise to men who are dead in trespasses and sins, that they might have life and that they might worship and serve the Creator more than the creature. Rather than wedding Christianity to the philosophies of Aristotle or Kant, we must openly challenge the apostate philosophic constructions of men by which they seek to suppress the truth about God, themselves, and the world.

To be sure, it is the *grace* of God which we proclaim to men, and we must proclaim the gospel *suaviter in modo*,⁶⁸ but nevertheless, we have not been true to Christ if we do not say with Paul: "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (I Cor. 1:20, 21).

We are children of the King. To us, not to the world, do all things belong. It is only if we demand of men complete submission to the living Christ of the Scriptures in every area of their lives, that we have presented to men the claims of the Lord Christ without compromise.

*A CONSISTENTLY REFORMED APOLOGETIC*⁶⁹

To this point no notice has been taken of the fact that not all Reformed theologians follow the method briefly suggested so far. What has been called the Reformed method in the preceding discussion is implied in the basic contention of Reformed theology, namely, the self-sufficiency and self-explanatory character of the triune God. But that such is the case has not always been recognized.

The Reformed theologians of the Reformation period did not work out a Reformed apologetical methodology. This is not to be marveled at. They laid the groundwork for it. Some later Reformed theologians continued to use the Romanist-evangelical method of defending Christianity. At least they did so up to the point where the specifically Reformed teachings on the sovereignty of God in soteriology came up for discussion. Thus the apologetics of the Reformed theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary (prior to its reorgani-

68. That is, "gentle in manner."

69. Excerpts from *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 19–21, 23–24.

zation in 1929 when the Reformed Faith was rejected in principle) used a method of argument similar to that employed in Bishop Butler's *Analogy*.⁷⁰

Now Butler's work is perhaps the most outstanding historical example of evangelical non-Reformed methodology. It starts with assuming that man, though he has not taken God into account, has by his own principles been able to interpret the course and constitution of nature aright. Butler's argument is to the effect that, if men would only follow the same method they have employed for the interpretation of nature when they are confronted with the claims of Christianity, they will be driven to accept the latter as true. Men have seen evidence of substitution in nature and they have recognized it as such. So then, why should they not also accept the idea of the substitutionary atonement by Christ, the Son of God, as presented in Scripture? Men have admitted that the exceptional, the inexplicable, takes place in nature. There is a principle of discontinuity as well as a principle of continuity that men recognize in the world. Why then should they object to the possibility of the supernatural and of miracle? They can allow for these without in the least giving up their own basic principle of interpretation.⁷¹

It was against a position similar to this that Dr. Abraham Kuyper protested in his famous work *Principles of Sacred Theology*.⁷² His argument is to the effect that apologetics of this nature gives over one bulwark after another to the enemy. Kuyper's contention is that the Christian must take his place directly upon the presupposition of the truth of the Christian religion as it is presented in Scripture.

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

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

It is to this basic approach of Kuyper and Bavinck, of Charles Hodge and B. B.

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

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

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

Warfield and Geerhardus Vos (ignoring or setting aside the remnants of the traditional method that is found in their works) that appeal is made in this work.

It is of critical importance in the current scene that a consistently Reformed apologetic be set forth. . . .

In the first place, every Christian must tell the non-Christian that he must be *saved* from his false views of God and himself. The greatest love can be shown for the lost only by those who have themselves sensed most deeply the lost condition from which they have been saved. The best physician is he who tells the patient who needs surgery that he must be rushed to the hospital, not he who tells him to take a strong sedative.

It is this that the present writer has learned from those from whom he has been bold enough to differ at points. It is only in a subordinate way that he differs from the great theologians of the preceding generation. The greater part of what is presented here is due to the fact that the writer stands on the shoulders of the great Reformed thinkers mentioned above. He is merely gathering together the thoughts found over a widely diversified body of their writings in order to present briefly that which basically they have taught. The present book is no more than an effort to stimulate thinking along the lines of consistent Christian approach to modern thought.

The message of Christianity must ring out clearly in the modern tumult. If Christianity is to be heard above the din and noise of modern irrationalism and existentialism, it must think in terms of its own basic categories. If it has to import some of its materials from the enemy, it cannot expect effectively to conquer the enemy. It is the Christian Faith that alone has the truth; this should be its claim. It should be made with all modesty; those who have accepted it once were blind. They have been saved by grace. Little would it behoove them to regard themselves as the source of wisdom. But disclaiming themselves as the source of wisdom, they cannot make apology for God and for Christ the Son of God. If men would be saved, if they would save their culture as well as themselves, they must meet the requirements of God. There is no other way to truth. "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that the world by its wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save those that believe" (1 Cor. 1:20, 21).

*THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING CHALLENGE*⁷³

If then Christianity as interpreted in the Reformed creeds, as championed by Kuyper, Bavinck, Hodge, Warfield and Machen, is to be presented to men

73. An excerpt from *Defense of the Faith*, 279–80.

today, ministers must learn to understand the riches of their own position. Christianity is the *sine qua non* of the intelligibility of anything. Why am I so much interested in the foundations of science? It is (a) because with Kuyper I believe that God requires of us that we claim every realm of being for him, and (b) because with Kuyper I believe that unless we press the crown rights of our King in every realm we shall not long retain them in any realm.