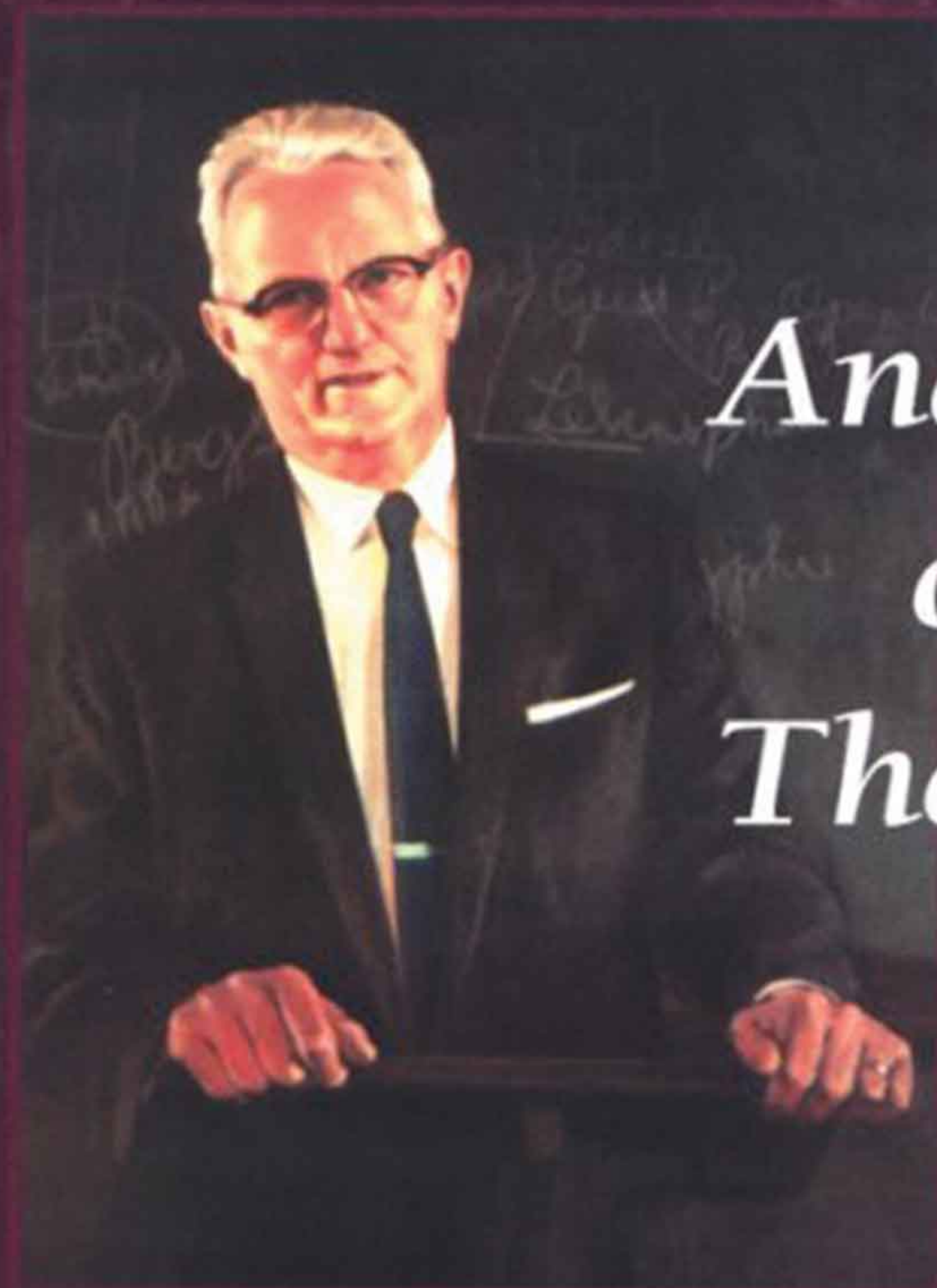


# *Cornelius* **VANTIL**



*An  
Analysis  
of His  
Thought*

**JOHN M. FRAME**

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



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## *Preface*

I submit this volume in celebration of Cornelius Van Til's one hundredth birthday, May 3, 1995. I trust that God will use it to draw public attention to this important thinker, to correct misunderstandings about him, and to help the Christian church make better use of his legacy.

This book is not a popularization or an introduction, but a serious, critical, analytical study. Nevertheless, I hope that it will be helpful to the work of introducing and popularizing Van Til's thought. One of the tasks I have set for myself is the job of translating and explaining Van Til's daunting terminology. I shall not avoid the use of philosophical and technical terms here, but when I do use them, I shall seek to explain them (both Van Til's and mine) in a way that will be understandable to most people who are capable of college-level study.

Some may find it helpful to read the last chapter first, for therein I summarize my conclusions and indicate the overall thrust of the book's argument.

This is not the last word on Van Til. I hope herein to further a genuine dialogue on his work, a dialogue that has heretofore been hindered by misinformation and poorly reasoned arguments for and against him. I am trying to go more deeply into Van Til's thought than have either his traditional friends or foes. If I have not succeeded, I pray that this book will provoke one or more successful alternative accounts with the same ambitions.

My thanks to those who have helped me in this study. Van Til's own teaching, of course, has been deeply formative, not only on the matters discussed here, but in all areas of my thought and life. I am also grateful for opportunities to interact with many colleagues, students, and others who are knowledgeable in Van Tillian matters: the names of Greg Bahnsen, Ed Clowney, Bill Edgar, John Gerstner, Jim Jordan, Scott Oliphint, Vern Poythress, Norman Shepherd, and Robert Strimple especially stand out in my mind. Thanks especially to Steve Hays, for a very thorough and brilliant critique of the first draft of this book, one from which I have profited in many ways, though I take full responsibility for the contents of the final version. My thanks also to Jim Scott for his editorial work. As to published sources, my bibliography and footnotes will indicate the great extent of my dependence on other thinkers.

My prayer is that God will use this volume to bring to his church a deeper obedience to his revealed Word, particularly in matters of the intellect, and to the world a more powerful presentation of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

## *Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Titles*

For publication information, see the bibliography. Titles are by Van Til unless otherwise indicated.

AGG	<i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i> , by John M. Frame
C67	<i>The Confession of 1967</i>
CA	<i>Christian Apologetics</i>
CB	<i>Christianity and Barthianism</i>
CC	<i>Christianity in Conflict</i>
CFC	<i>The Case for Calvinism</i>
CGG	<i>Common Grace and the Gospel</i>
CI	<i>Christianity and Idealism</i>
CJ	<i>Christ and the Jews</i>
CMT	<i>Christianity in Modern Theology</i>
CTETH	<i>Christian Theistic Ethics</i>
CTEV	<i>Christian-Theistic Evidences</i>
CTK	<i>A Christian Theory of Knowledge</i>
DCC	<i>The Defense of Christianity and My Credo</i>
DF1	<i>The Defense of the Faith</i> (original edition)
DF2	<i>The Defense of the Faith</i> (revised 1963 edition)
DKG	<i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> , by John M. Frame

ECE	<i>Essays on Christian Education</i>
GD	<i>Is God Dead?</i>
GDT	<i>The Great Debate Today</i>
GH	<i>The God of Hope</i>
HDRA	<i>Herman Dooyeweerd and Reformed Apologetics</i>
ICG	<i>The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel</i>
IST	<i>An Introduction to Systematic Theology</i>
IW	"Introduction" to Warfield, <i>The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible</i>
JA	<i>Jerusalem and Athens</i> , edited by E. R. Geehan
NH	<i>The New Hermeneutic</i>
NM	<i>The New Modernism</i>
NRC	<i>Notes on Roman Catholicism</i>
NS	"Nature and Scripture," in <i>The Infallible Word</i> , edited by Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley
NST	<i>The New Synthesis Theology of the Netherlands</i>
PDS	<i>The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture</i>
PR	<i>Psychology of Religion</i>
RP	<i>The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought</i>
SCE	<i>A Survey of Christian Epistemology</i>
SG	<i>The Sovereignty of Grace</i>
TG	<i>The Triumph of Grace</i>
TJD	<i>The Theology of James Daane</i>
VTDF	<i>Van Til: Defender of the Faith</i> , by William White, Jr.
VTT	<i>Van Til: The Theologian</i> , by John Frame
WIB	<i>Why I Believe in God</i>
WSA	<i>Who Do You Say That I Am?</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

## PART ONE

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### *Introductory Considerations*





## CHAPTER ONE

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### *Starting Point*

It is an enormous privilege for me to be able to write about Cornelius Van Til, who has been, after Scripture, the major theological influence upon me, and who is, in my estimation, the most important Christian thinker of the twentieth century. I have been criticized for using such superlatives to describe Van Til, but I intend to use them again, and to defend that use, in the present volume. In any case, and especially now, around the one hundredth anniversary of his birth (May 3, 1995), he should have a tribute—but also more than a tribute.

What I would offer him on this occasion is something that was in rare supply during his lifetime: sympathetic, comprehensive, critical analysis. To be sure, many have written articles and books on Van Til's work, and many of these are useful. But none of them, in my estimation, combines sympathy, comprehensiveness, and critical analysis.

#### SYMPATHY

Sympathy, of course, has abounded. There are a number of books and articles about Van Til that express agreement with his point of view. Many of these are excellent as introductions, popularizations, or paraphrases. Rousas J. Rushdoony's *By What Standard?*<sup>1</sup> presents Van

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<sup>1</sup>Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959.

Til's thought more systematically than Van Til himself ever did. George Marston's *The Voice of Authority*<sup>2</sup> presents Van Til's basic assertions very simply, but accurately. Richard Pratt's *Every Thought Captive*<sup>3</sup> skillfully presents Van Til's apologetic as a witnessing guide for young people.<sup>4</sup>

These sympathetic books (and the same could be said for many sympathetic articles) rarely take note of possible criticisms of Van Til, except insofar as they reproduce, often in Van Til's own terminology, his replies to objections. That very terminology is itself often problematic, and so this method is usually inadequate to deal with the difficulties. Furthermore, these authors themselves are not at all critical of Van Til. To say that is not to disparage their books and articles. They were written for purposes other than critical analysis, and for those purposes they are valuable.

## DEBUNKERS

However, Van Til has not missed the opportunity to receive negative criticism. The first book-length treatment of him was James Daane's *A Theology of Grace*,<sup>5</sup> which was a rather strange attempt to debunk Van Til's book *Common Grace*.<sup>6</sup> "Debunk" is the right word: Daane believes that Van Til's book is entirely wrongheaded. Others, though greatly differing with Daane as to their specific criticisms, have also taken the debunking route: Buswell, Montgomery, Pinnock, Robbins, Crampton. The book *Classical Apologetics*, by John Gerstner, R. C. Sproul, and Arthur Lindsley, is in a somewhat different category. It does show some genuine affection for Van Til; indeed, the book is dedicated to him. But the authors are quite convinced that Van Til's distinctive ideas are entirely wrong, and, in trying to show that, they present his ideas very misleadingly. Thus, I list them, too, among the debunkers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960; reprint, Vallecito, Calif.: Ross House Books, 1978.

<sup>3</sup>Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979.

<sup>4</sup>I am less enthusiastic about Jim S. Halsey's *For a Time Such as This* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), which tends to oversimplify and dogmatize, and which recommends most highly the weakest elements of Van Til's thought.

<sup>5</sup>Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954.

<sup>6</sup>For my critique of Daane, see chap. 16. I shall discuss other critics of Van Til in later portions of this volume.

<sup>7</sup>Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984. My review of this book is reproduced as appendix A in this volume.

G. C. Berkouwer, too, although he had a somewhat gentler approach than the previously mentioned writers, was essentially a debunker.<sup>8</sup> Berkouwer never studied Van Til with the carefulness and precision that he gave to others (notably Barth), and therefore, in my estimation, he never understood much of what Van Til was all about. Although he never made the point in so many words, it would seem that he regarded the differences between Van Til and himself merely as symptoms of Van Til's scholarly incompetence.

Some of these debunkers, particularly Montgomery, Berkouwer, and *Classical Apologetics*, raise good questions, but their antipathy to Van Til's ideas prevents them, in my opinion, from presenting an accurate picture of his thought. Therefore, they are unable to deal with their own good questions in an illuminating way.

## ANALYSIS

Neither the sympathetic disciples nor the debunkers present much valuable *analysis* of Van Til's thought. Analysis is the process by which a thinker's ideas are carefully scrutinized in detail and in depth to produce understanding of that thinker beyond the surface level. Analysis of Van Til would seek to develop more precise definitions of his terms and more explicit logical formulations of his arguments than he himself provides. It might also seek to evaluate carefully the consistency, rational adequacy, and, above all, the scriptural character of his ideas, recommending improvement (in statement or concept) where that appears necessary (in that sense I speak of "critical" analysis).

An anti-Van Tillian can do this up to a point, but, I am convinced, really incisive analysis of Van Til requires some level of commitment to his fundamental vision. Frankly, the debunkers always seem to miss the obvious. At least the sympathetic accounts take accurate note of the obvious. But sympathy alone is not sufficient for critical analysis, which seeks to advance beyond the obvious.

There have been some examples of sympathetic analysis in the Van Til literature. Thom Notaro's *Van Til and the Use of Evidence*<sup>9</sup> is not critical, but it is certainly analytical, in that it greatly clarifies cer-

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<sup>8</sup>See the appendix on Van Til in Berkouwer's *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 384–93, and his "The Authority of Scripture (A Responsible Confession)," in *JA*, 197–203.

<sup>9</sup>Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980.

tain matters in Van Til that are widely misunderstood. The articles in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, edited by Gary North (Vallecito, Calif.: Ross House, 1976), similarly, do not find fault with Van Til (with the exception of my article), but they do illuminate Van Til's thinking and apply it to areas of life and thought that Van Til himself did not address. The same can be said of many other writings from advocates of the Christian reconstruction movement.

I have tried to engage in sympathetic (and therefore constructive) *critical* analysis of Van Til in my *Van Til: The Theologian* and more recently in "Cornelius Van Til"<sup>10</sup> and *Apologetics to the Glory of God*. The only other examples known to me are the articles by Gilbert B. Weaver<sup>11</sup> and Gordon R. Lewis<sup>12</sup> in *Jerusalem and Athens* and the book *Dominion and Common Grace* by Gary North.<sup>13</sup> Writers of the Dooyeweerdian school have also attempted this sort of interaction with Van Til,<sup>14</sup> but I find their critique extremely implausible, and therefore not illuminating.

### PIECEMEAL ANALYSIS

In my view, the kind of analysis that is most needed is that which takes Van Til's system apart, bit by bit, looking at its individual elements and evaluating them both individually and in the context of the whole. Van Til's writings may give the impression that this kind of analysis cannot be done, that no element of the system can be analyzed apart from the whole. Van Til himself regularly talks about his apologetic proving Christian theism "as a unit." The pedagogy of his writing style is to throw a great many ideas at the reader all at once,

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<sup>10</sup>In Walter Elwell, ed., *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 156–67.

<sup>11</sup>"Man: Analogue of God," in JA, 321–27.

<sup>12</sup>"Van Til and Carnell—Part I," in JA, 349–61.

<sup>13</sup>Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987. I would commend this volume with some reservations, although I have some conflict of interest in doing so. The book is dedicated to me—with, to be sure, a good amount of tongue in cheek. More on that in a moment. I do not, however, recommend another book by North, *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), which I consider extremely confused.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, in JA, Robert D. Knudsen, "Progressive and Regressive Tendencies in Christian Apologetics," 275–98, and Dooyeweerd, "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought," 74–89.

not pausing very long to explain any one of them. He emphasizes constantly that no part of the system can be understood or affirmed apart from the rest.

Van Til's interpreters tend to think, therefore, that one must either accept or reject his thought *in toto*, that one cannot pick and choose among its elements. This has contributed to the polarization in Van Tillian scholarship between adulators and debunkers. How can there be any middle way, anything other than total acceptance or total rejection, if the system is wired together as tightly as it appears to be?

The compacting of everything together in Van Til's thought has also made it hard for students to learn his system with any good level of understanding. For they have not received any systematic, progressive instruction that would insure that they understand proposition A before progressing to proposition B.

There can be no doubt that Van Til's thought forms a system. There is a high level of mutual dependence among its assertions. Nevertheless, Van Til himself resisted the extreme view of idealist philosophy that one must know the whole of something before one can know any of its parts. On Van Til's own view, there is in the created world an equal ultimacy of both universal and particular, and both whole and part, because there is an equal ultimacy of one and many in the ontological Trinity.

Despite the impression that Van Til's thought is a seamless robe, it seems to me not only possible, but also highly desirable, to look at its parts separately. I propose to do that in this volume. Of course, in doing so, we must guard the equal ultimacy of part and whole; we must constantly ask how each part affects the others and affects the totality. But with that caveat in mind, I propose to take Van Til's system apart, piece by piece, analyzing and evaluating each assertion in itself and in its relation to the whole.

My conclusion will be that, after all, Van Til's system is not a seamless robe. It is possible and necessary to accept some parts of it and to reject others. In my view, the most important parts of Van Til's system are biblical and should be maintained in any future apologetic. But some of his formulations are confusing and not biblically warranted. In my view, these are less central to Van Til's system. I grant, however, that opinions may differ as to what is most important. Indeed, my opinion on that matter may be different from Van Til's own. But, of course, opinions as to what is most important may themselves be of little importance.

## COMPREHENSIVENESS

As I have pointed out, sympathetic, critical analysis of Van Til has been quite rare. And what there has been, as in the titles listed above by Weaver, Lewis, North, and Frame, has not been comprehensive, but rather has been limited to one or more specific matters. The present volume, then, is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to analyze all the basic elements of Van Til's thought from a sympathetic, yet critical, perspective. Certainly it is not exhaustive, nor is it any sort of ultimate or final statement. But it is important for us to get started on the task of developing a comprehensive understanding, evaluation, and application of Van Til's work, and I hope that this book will make a contribution to that end.

It is best that analysis be both piecemeal and comprehensive, thus maintaining the equal ultimacy of whole and part.

## CRITICISM AND MOVEMENT LEADERS

But why do we need a *critical* analysis of Van Til? The answer to that question may be obvious to some, as it is to me. But to those within the Van Tillian "movement," the campaign to reform apologetics and the rest of human life according to Van Til's principles, the answer may not be so clear.

The movement mentality is different from the scholarly mentality, generally speaking. I was reminded of that when I first read Gary North's dedication in *Dominion and Common Grace*, addressed to me. The inscription reads:

This book is dedicated to

John Frame

an uncommonly gracious man,  
who will no doubt conclude that  
portions of this book are good,  
other portions are questionable,  
but the topic warrants further study.

First, my thanks to Gary for the kind words, and for the enjoyable irony. His prophecy is right on target, as is his characterization of

my approach to issues.<sup>15</sup> In *Westminster's Confession*, he comments:

Frame likes some aspects of theonomy, but he doesn't like others. *Sic et non* John strikes again! In the words of one professor at Covenant Seminary: "There have been three approaches to apologetics at Westminster Seminary. Van Til said that everyone else was wrong. Frame thinks that there are some correct things in everyone's system and some incorrect things. Poythress thinks that everyone is correct, from a certain point of view."<sup>16</sup>

North is a movement leader, the movement in his case being "theonomy" or "Christian reconstruction," and he has a typical movement mentality. Everyone, he thinks, should be either for him or against him, either hot or cold. Those who accept some of his ideas, but not others, are fence-sitters, lukewarm, wishy-washy. Jesus, of course, was a movement leader in this sense. He demanded wholehearted discipleship and condemned those who put their hand to the plow and looked back (Luke 9:62). Luther and Calvin had much of this spirit, since they perceived loyalty to the Reformation as a demand of Christian discipleship, nothing less. No doubt North feels the same way about theonomy.

But I tend to look at theonomy as a mixed blessing to the church, not as a movement that requires of me, on the authority of Christ, a wholehearted commitment. I look at theonomy in a more typically academic way, as a Christian scholar, seeking to separate wheat from chaff. Hence, I tend to be amazed that anyone should actually criticize me for liking some things and not liking other things. Is that not the essence of the theological task, to sort out the good and the bad? Does North seriously expect me to like everything about his movement? The fact is that the reconstructionists themselves, including North, do not like everything about their movement, for they are deeply divided on a number of issues.

Now there was always a kind of duality in Van Til: he was both a serious theological-philosophical scholar and a movement leader. That

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<sup>15</sup>In correspondence I had said this sort of thing about a number of his ideas.

<sup>16</sup>Pp. 202–3. See also p. 242, n. 23. Of course, the comments about Van Til and Poythress should be taken with much more than a grain of salt. *Sic et Non* ("Yes and No") was a book by Peter Abelard that simply listed theological questions and arguments for each of the opposing answers to those questions.



duality has not been entirely unique in the history of thought: among Christian thinkers, consider Luther, Calvin, Kuyper, and Machen; on the non-Christian side, consider Marx, Freud, Darwin, Wittgenstein, and the contemporary gurus of political correctness and New Age thought.

But that duality in a thinker creates a certain tension among his followers and critics: do they treat him as a thinker or as a movement leader? Usually, we treat the two types of people rather differently. A thinker is subject to criticism from other thinkers. In the case of Cicero, or Irenaeus, or B. B. Warfield, or C. S. Lewis (to name some who are not generally regarded today as movement leaders), we take what we think is good and reject what we think is bad. But movement leaders, like Gary North, are different. Criticism of the leader can be regarded as disloyalty to the movement. Those outside the movement are not supposed to say anything good about the leader, while those in the movement are not supposed to say anything bad. The leader's ideas must be defended, even when such defense requires extreme mental gyrations.

The fact that most literature about Van Til is either wholly uncritical or wholly critical shows that most writers have looked at him more as a movement leader than as a serious scholar. There are exceptions: some on both sides have wrestled with his thought in a disciplined way. But that has not been typical.

I overstate the matter somewhat, but not by much. The authority of the leader of an intellectual movement (to say nothing of political movements like fascism and communism) can sometimes reach cultic proportions. Thomas Kuhn, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>17</sup> comments on parallels between religious movements and followers of scientific "paradigms." He argues that such paradigms establish "communities" in which adherence to certain formulations becomes a credential of scientific competence, so that one cannot seriously question the theory and remain a member in good standing of the scientific community. Has not Darwinism in our day achieved a cult status, particularly in the educational community?

Now Van Til was—and still is, through his writings—the leader of a movement in theology, philosophy, and apologetics. I write as a committed member of that movement. I am not ashamed at its existence. I honestly wish that everyone would be converted to Van Til's

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<sup>17</sup>Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

basic principles, for such conversion is to nothing other than consistent Christianity. Were everyone a Van Tillian at heart, our society would be vastly transformed, and that for the better. If there is justification for movements in politics, economics, science, or philosophy, then there is certainly far more justification for a movement seeking Van Tillian reformation of all of life. And it is not wrong for that movement to adopt informally some general criteria for membership in good standing. None of this implies, of course, that Van Til was right about everything.

That having been said, we do Van Til (and other Christian theologians) an injustice when we carry the movement mentality too far. For one thing, he was much more than the leader of a movement. He was also a thinker of extraordinary insight. Treating him as a kind of “guru” stifles open discussion of the issues he raises, and that impoverishes all of us, whether we are inside or outside the movement. And if, as members of the movement, we want to make the best possible use of Van Til’s ideas, we must be able to distinguish what is best and what is worst in his formulations.

More important, it is significant that the great leaders of God’s people in Scripture were never beyond criticism, except when they were divinely inspired. And even prophecy had to be tested to make sure that it agreed with past revelation (Deut. 18:21–22; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 14:37). “Test everything,” says the apostle Paul (1 Thess. 5:21). Van Til himself has taught us that no theologian is exempt from such testing. Influenced as he was by such Reformed theological giants as B. B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck, Van Til nevertheless sought to warn us against elements in their thinking that he deemed unscriptural.

Would Van Til have been pleased to see us evaluating his thought on the basis of Scripture, seeking to come to a position more fully scriptural than even his own? I believe he would have. He was not, of course, a highly self-critical person. When others offered him suggestions for improving his formulations, he did not often receive such suggestions gladly. Indeed, he had a tendency to react to criticism by reading the critic out of the movement: the critic was not to be heeded, because he presupposed Scholastic, Arminian, or Kantian premises, and that was all that needed to be said!

Still, I think that Van Til, like his disciples, felt somewhat the paradox of his being both a scholar and a movement leader. The authoritarianism of the general who leads his troops into intellectual

warfare is not easily reconciled with the flexibility and self-critical attitude of the ideal scholar. Sometimes it seemed as though Van Til insulated himself against any kind of serious criticism.<sup>18</sup> But at other times, perhaps at another level of his consciousness, he certainly desired more constructive criticism, more of the “iron sharpening iron” of Proverbs 27:17, the “multitude of counselors” of Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6. Notice, for example:

1. In his advanced seminars, he tended to prod to greater participation those students whom he thought would raise challenging questions. I was one of those students.

2. He said to me at one point that his distinctive views on apologetics should not be made a test of orthodoxy in the churches. To be sure, it is arguable that he did make some of them into a test of orthodoxy during the controversy over Gordon H. Clark. Nevertheless, his comment indicates that, at least later in his life, he did believe there was room for critical discussion of his ideas among Reformed people.

3. Although he sought the support of others, he was privately a bit scornful of the “adulation” that he received from some of his disciples.

4. Although he trained his students to use his slogans and illustrations, he nevertheless hoped for more from them. He announced that students who merely echoed his slogans without exhibiting individual thought would get C’s on their papers, while students who disagreed with him, but displayed careful scholarship and intelligent analysis, would receive higher grades.

5. My 1976 paper, *Van Til: The Theologian*, called for “constructive critical analysis” of Van Til.<sup>19</sup> He did not take offense at that; indeed, he arranged to have the paper published in booklet form.

6. In 1979 I published a review of William White’s “authorized biography,” *Van Til: Defender of the Faith*.<sup>20</sup> I noted some good things about the book, but I felt duty-bound as a reviewer also to point out that it contained some historical errors and presented a very confused picture of Van Til’s thought. *Sic et non* John strikes again! I concluded with the following exhortation:

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<sup>18</sup>See my discussion in chap. 2 about Van Til’s isolation from the mainstream of theological debate.

<sup>19</sup>P. 5, n. 10.

<sup>20</sup>*WTJ* 42 (fall 1979): 198–203.

But after one reads a book like this, one becomes more impressed with our *need* for a serious critical history of Van Til and his time. A serious historian would not have allowed so many unclarities and other problems to creep into the discussion. And he would have raised more hard questions. White's Van Til does almost nothing wrong (White does say he was "wrong to think of quitting school," 30), almost never even makes an unwise judgment. All his major problems were someone else's fault. There is a spirit of adulation here which detracts from the credibility of the book, even seen as a mere memoir. Whatever happened to biblical realism—the stories of Abraham, David, Paul? But that uncritical atmosphere is hard to escape in the memoir *genre*. Even Stonehouse's book on Machen, a far more scholarly and careful book than White's, breathes too much a spirit of filial piety. So far as I know, no one within the Westminster movement has actually taken a hard, tough-minded, historical look at that movement, at least in print. Why? Are we afraid of what we might find? . . . The book fails . . . as a serious *analysis* of Van Til's life and thought and it has many detailed failings. A revolutionary thinker like Van Til deserves a better tribute than this, I think—one which demands more of writer and reader, one which radically forces us to examine our most basic assumptions, even about Van Til. He has never asked less of himself, thank God.<sup>21</sup>

It was good to get that off my chest! But I confess that after it was published I did worry about what Van Til would think of me. After all, the book was his "authorized biography," and White was a good friend of his, who had never been enthusiastic about my teaching of apologetics.

White, by the way, was the most extreme of the movement-minded Van Tillians. His opinion of me is on record in an exchange of letters with me in *Journey Magazine*.<sup>22</sup> In this exchange he accused me of violating my ordination vows—not because I had contradicted

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<sup>21</sup>P. 203.

<sup>22</sup>March–April 1988, 9–11; May–June 1988, 13; July–October 1988, 45–46; January–February 1989, 14–15, 22–23.

Scripture or any Reformed confession, and not even because I had uttered some disagreement with Van Til. Rather, White gave me this strong reproof because I had contradicted his assessment of how we should apply Van Til's insights to current issues. White's charge against me is found in his letter in the issue of May–June 1988. He thought that Van Til's thought forbade us to learn from non-Christians, or even from non-Reformed Christians. I disagreed—and I will defend my position in chapter 15 of this volume. White also objected to the fact that I had advocated proclaiming and teaching the Reformed faith without using traditional Reformed terminology. Had Van Til been living at the time, I believe he would have sided with me against White on that precise point. But White thought otherwise, and he asserted that I had broken my ordination vow because I differed with the positions he attributed to Van Til. White is in heaven now and knows better, I am sure. But his comments in these letters remain behind as extraordinary examples of a quite irrational movement mentality. Naturally, then, I was a bit fearful as to how Van Til would respond to the situation.

I was therefore as relieved as surprised when I received in California a letter from Van Til praising the review. I was even more surprised when I learned, after his death, that he had asked Grace Mullens at the Westminster Seminary library to place in his archive the *Journal* issue containing my review. His note to her included the following:

But if you *really* want to know why I am so insistent that you put this issue of the W. T. J. in my archives look at page 198. What a model I am; John H. [*sic*] Frame turns honest actually, believe it or not, some serious flaws in his teacher i.e. C. V. T. But in general it is flattering—and does C. V. T. *love* it.<sup>23</sup>

I am not sure what he meant by the “serious flaws,” since none are actually mentioned in the article, and other elements of the note (written by him at age 85, some years after he had ceased writing for publication) are not entirely perspicuous. But it does suggest to me that he was in essential agreement with my call for “constructive critical analysis” of his work.

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<sup>23</sup>Emphasis his.

## A TESTIMONY

Some believe that personal reflections are out of place in academic scholarship. I have broken that rule already in this volume and will break it again. Certainly if there is any truth at all in presuppositionalism, it is important for a writer, especially a critical analyst, to let his readers know where he is coming from.

Van Til was raised and educated entirely among Reformed Christians until his doctoral program. Unlike him, I was converted to Christianity around age thirteen through the ministry of a church that, though confessionally Reformed, was only broadly evangelical in its working theology. And I am a product of secular education, except for my three years at Westminster Seminary from 1961 to 1964.

As a college student, I struggled with the usual intellectual issues, trying to relate my faith especially to the philosophical disciplines. I was helped somewhat by the traditional evidential apologists: Arthur Pierson's *Many Infallible Proofs*, Wilbur Smith's *Therefore, Stand*, John Gerstner's *Reasons for Faith*. During this time, I also learned much from John Gerstner himself, who spoke often at youth conferences in the Pittsburgh area. He strongly influenced my theology in a Reformed direction. But it was C. S. Lewis's writings that first enabled me to see that there were deep worldview differences, philosophical differences, between Christians and non-Christians.

Then I began to hear about Van Til. In college I was a member of a campus Christian group called the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship. The PEF members were mostly dispensational in theology and somewhat anti-intellectual; they were not happy with my choice of philosophy as a major. But they were also quite in awe of certain Reformed writers: Warfield, Machen, Van Til. I read some Warfield and a lot of Machen (*Christianity and Liberalism* set me on a lifetime course of sharp opposition to theological liberalism in all its forms). And it was Van Til who set me on a clear course through the philosophical waters. I used his approach in my term papers and senior thesis, somewhat to the bewilderment of my professors; they had, I am sure, never seen anything like that before. I was amazed to find that the same Bible that presents the message of salvation also presents a distinctive philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, one which alone makes sense of human life. Van Til's work encouraged me to take an offensive, rather than merely defensive, stance against non-Christian thought.

Studying with Van Til at Westminster was a wonderful, mind-expanding experience. Van Til's erudition in the philosophical and theological literature exceeded that of any of my professors at Princeton, as did the depth of his penetrating analysis. He was simply the most profound scholar I had ever known, and his very presence refuted claims that secularism was the only intelligent option. And he was not only the most profound scholar I had known, but also one of the most distinctively Christian—refuting the dictum that the more scholarly a Christian is, the more he compromises his faith.

Communication between Van Til and myself was not always easy. His philosophical vocabulary was that of idealism; mine was that of Anglo-American language analysis. He was steeped in Reformed, especially Dutch Reformed, literature and tradition; I was not. Once I served as a waiter at a dinner for scholars at the church across from the seminary. I brought some food to a table where Van Til was seated with some other men. He turned away from his conversation, looked directly at me, and said, out of the blue, "From now on, I'm going to speak only Dutch to you; then you'll learn it!" I suspect he believed that nobody could do really profound theology in the Reformed tradition without mastering that "language of the angels." Some years later, I did acquire some reading knowledge of Dutch, but never to the extent that he had perhaps hoped.

Van Til equated the Reformed creeds very closely with the teaching of Scripture and was very suspicious of any terminology or ideas that came from outside the Reformed tradition. I was, and am, more ecumenical in spirit.<sup>24</sup> He seemed to find his greatest delight in the doctrines that are distinctive to the Reformed faith; I, on the other hand, take my greatest delight in those doctrines which all Christians share (as defined by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381), although I also treasure the distinctively Reformed doctrines as the most biblically consistent way of formulating and elaborating those teachings. Van Til tended to put the worst possible construction on the statements of non-Reformed writers; I tend to give them more of the benefit of the doubt. In my view, Van Til was something of a Reformed chauvinist; in his view, I was too friendly to broad evangelicalism. Van Til never actually said that God had given all the truth to one theological tradition, but that seemed to be his working assumption. It was not, and still is not, mine.

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<sup>24</sup>See my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).



Van Til was not good at answering my questions, particularly questions asking for precise definitions, syllogistic formulations of arguments, and the like. He tended to avoid those questions, preferring to reiterate his oft-stated positions at length. I learned quickly that in order to profit from Van Til's teaching, a student had to let him set the agenda. If readers of this book want to know whether I, as Van Til's student and colleague, asked him the sorts of questions I ask in this book, the answer is: yes, I did, but he was not able, in my opinion, to respond adequately to them.

And, of course, there was the problem of relating to Van Til as a movement leader. I am not a movement person. Although I understand the need for reformation in the church at various times, and therefore the need for reformation movements, I must balance this against Paul's condemnation of party spirit in 1 Corinthians. As I suggested earlier, I am not ashamed to be part of the Van Tillian movement, but I resist the extreme development of a movement mentality in those circles.

Van Til's classes, however, were as much movement boot camps as they were graduate courses. Students who asked too many hard questions were sometimes (prematurely in my opinion) dismissed as Arminian or worse. I was never much interested in playing this game. So my term papers for Van Til's courses were somewhat lacking in the usual Van Tillian sloganizing. I used my own vocabulary and developed ideas in my own way. They were Van Tillian in content, for the most part, but they did not sound much like Van Til, and they sometimes raised serious questions about his formulations. He was, for some years, a bit suspicious of me on that account. When I returned to Westminster to teach, it was not at his initiative or in his department, but at the initiative of Professor Norman Shepherd to teach systematic theology. Nevertheless, Van Til invited me to teach Th.M.-level courses in apologetics on the subject of analytic philosophy. Nor was I Van Til's choice to teach the introductory apologetics course when he retired from it in 1972; Harvie Conn succeeded him in that responsibility. But when Conn dropped his apologetics teaching in 1975 to concentrate on missions, Van Til had no objection to my teaching the course.

So on I went, somewhat at the edge of his circle. As I indicated earlier, he later commended me in various ways, but we were not personally close friends.

I came into conflict with some of the more extreme "movement

Van Tillians,” such as Jim Halsey<sup>25</sup> and William White.<sup>26</sup> The “movement Van Tillians” were personally closer to Van Til than I was, but by that time Van Til was in his eighties and nineties and somewhat above the battle. He encouraged both them and me on various occasions.

I have decided to be open with my readers about all of this. There are different kinds of Van Tillians, and not all of them will like this book. But I do still believe that the movement itself will benefit more from embracing a critical-analytical approach than from excluding it. And thus I proclaim myself a loyal Van Tillian, although I reject the view that Van Til’s ideas should have confessional<sup>27</sup> or deuterocanonical status.

More importantly, my ultimate allegiance, like Van Til’s, is to the Christ of Scripture. Not to scholarly canons of respectability, but to God’s rules for thought. Not to any human tradition or movement, but to God’s Word. Not to any human means of self-salvation, but to the grace of God in Christ. As with Van Til, these commitments place me in opposition to all the idols that people put in God’s place, notably the idol of human intellectual, metaphysical, or moral autonomy. This is the ultimate presupposition of my heart and thought.

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<sup>25</sup>Note some of my comments about Halsey in DKG.

<sup>26</sup>In the review mentioned above.

<sup>27</sup>The “Recommended Curriculum for Ministerial Preparation in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church” (in *The Book of Church Order*) includes “the school of Van Tilian presuppositionalism as the most biblically faithful expression of Reformed apologetics.”