

Jerusalem and Athens

**Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of
CORNELIUS VAN TIL**



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CORNELIUS VAN TIL

Edited by
E. R. GEEHAN

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CONTENTS

Dedication	vii
Introduction	ix
Cornelius Van Til	
PART ONE—MY CREDO	1
PART TWO—LETTERS FROM THREE CONTINENTS ...	23
Hendrik G. Stoker	
I. Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Prof. Dr. Cornelius Van Til	25
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	71
Herman Dooyeweerd	
II. Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought	74
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	89
PART THREE—ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD	129
Philip Edgcumbe Hughes	
III. Crucial Biblical Passages for Christian Apologetics	131
J. I. Packer	
IV. Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy	141
Jack B. Rogers	
V. Van Til and Warfield on Scripture in the Westminster Confession	154
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	165
Cornelius Trimp	
VI. The Witness of the Scriptures	172
John A. Witmer	
VII. What Think Ye of Christ?	185
G. C. Berkouwer	
VIII. The Authority of Scripture (A Responsible Confession)	197
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	203
S. U. Zuidema	
IX. Existence and the Content of Revelation in the Theological Hermeneutics of Rudolf Bultmann	205

Paul K. Jewett

- X. Concerning Christ, Christians, and Jews 221
Response by C. Van Til 226

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

- XI. Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul 228
Response by C. Van Til 237

Herman Ridderbos

- XII. Tradition and Editorship in the Synoptic Gospels 244

William L. Lane

- XIII. The Speeches of the Book of Acts 260

PART FOUR—ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY
AND APOLOGETICS

273

Robert D. Knudsen

- XIV. Progressive and Regressive Tendencies
in Christian Apologetics 275
Response by C. Van Til 298

J. P. A. Mekkes

- XV. Knowing 306
Response by C. Van Til 319

Gilbert B. Weaver

- XVI. Man: Analogue of God 321

C. Gregg Singer

- XVII. A Philosophy of History 328

Rousas John Rushdoony

- XVIII. The One and Many Problem—The
Contribution of Van Til 339
Response by C. Van Til 348

Gordon R. Lewis

- XIX. Van Til and Carnell—Part I 349
Response by C. Van Til 361

Charles M. Horne

- XX. Van Til and Carnell—Part II 369

John Warwick Montgomery

- XXI. Once Upon an A Priori 380
Response by C. Van Til 392

W. Stanford Reid

- XXII. Subjectivity or Objectivity in Historical Understanding 404

Clark H. Pinnock

XXIII. The Philosophy of Christian Evidences	420
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	426

Arthur F. Holmes

XXIV. Language, Logic, and Faith	428
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	438

Frederic R. Howe

XXV. Kerygma and Apologia	445
<i>Response by C. Van Til</i>	452

Notes and References	453
----------------------------	-----

List of Contributors	489
----------------------------	-----

Writings of Cornelius Van Til	492
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What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instructions come from "the porch of Solomon," who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart." Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.

—Tertullian, *The Prescription
Against Heretics*, VII

DEDICATION

These critical essays are dedicated to Cornelius Van Til on the occasions of his 75th birthday and 40th anniversary as professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, in recognition of his tireless effort in the statement and defense of the Christian Faith.

As the author of *Common Grace*, *The New Modernism*, *The Defense of the Faith*, *Christianity and Barthianism*, and *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, his influence has been both strategic and controversial. The extensive impact of this original and penetrating Christian apologist has been aided by the private circulation of such "unpublished" class syllabi as *Apologetics*, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, *New Evangelicalism*, and *Christianity in Conflict* (3 vols.) which have found their way far outside the confines of the classes for which they were written.

Prof. Van Til's writings, with their depth and logical rigor as well as prophetic urgency, have not won him many allies. In this ecumenical age he is disturbingly but intentionally out of place. To maintain that the Christian must continue, and that the non-Christian must begin, to bring every thought into obedience to the biblical Christ is, in this pluralistic age, *déclassé*. His warnings against the church's parasitic existence on the wisdom of the world divide his readers into equally adamant friends and foes. His writings drive "hard bargains" in the day of the "wheeler-dealer" and the precedence of a pragmatic theory of action over any and all theories of truth.

Dr. Van Til's lectures, whether given in Roman Catholic, Jewish, fundamentalist, liberal, or Calvinist institutions, are equally demanding. Concern for the souls of men, the life of the church, and the glory of God comes across with a passion and love not so evident on the printed page. His disarming personal warmth and humble manner, his pre-eminent devotion to Christ and his church, and his clear and homespun exposition have afforded him favorable reception among the many who would not have been reached with the complex and philosophically oriented arguments of his books and syllabi.

Yet for all this prodigious activity, the influence of Cornelius Van Til has been spread mostly by his students. In his 40 years at West-

minster Theological Seminary he has shared his convictions and concerns with thousands of students from dozens of denominations from around the world. It is these men who now write and preach, not as disciples of Van Til, but as those men who, with his help, have seen the necessity of a Christian life and world view. They have learned from him that a full-fledged Christian perspective, whether in culture, in the sciences, in politics, or in business, is not something which now exists, but is a goal always to be pursued. Along with Herman Dooyeweerd in the Netherlands and H. G. Stoker in South Africa, Cornelius Van Til has worked to establish the foundations of a Christian world and life view in the United States. A *Festschrift* to Dooyeweerd has appeared in Europe; one is shortly to appear in Africa to Stoker. This "American version" is now published as a tribute to Cornelius Van Til with the prayer that it too will be a significant step toward the goal which he so earnestly has sought: a consistently Christian apologetic.

E.R.G.

E. R. Geehan

INTRODUCTION

This symposium is composed of essays which deal, more or less directly, with the problems and issues raised and discussed in the apologetics of Cornelius Van Til. Nevertheless, it is precisely these issues—the authority of the Scriptures, the noetic effects of the Fall, the existence of “common ground” between believer and unbeliever—which have been at the forefront of theological discussion in the twentieth century, especially in evangelical circles. The essays contained herein are, in this regard, significant continuations of these discussions and therefore become of interest to all concerned with such problems and not only to those who seek to honor Cornelius Van Til in this way.

In order to increase the usefulness of this symposium within this wider context of interest, especially for those either new to the issues themselves or unfamiliar with the work of Prof. Van Til, three alterations have been introduced into this work which thereby distinguish it from its European counterpart, the *Festschrift*. First, Dr. Van Til was prevailed upon to write a basic, non-philosophical introduction to his own thought. This is found in the first essay, “My Credo.” Second, he was asked to respond to each essay which he felt necessitated, in some way, a reply. Third, it was decided to provide this introduction to the work as a whole, thereby providing the reader with a “road map” to the logical structure of the book.

* * * * *

In Parts I and II are essays which serve to acquaint the reader with the position of Cornelius Van Til, giving him a fairly secure “point of reference” from which to evaluate the discussions in Parts III and IV. Nevertheless, Part II takes the reader into the complex philosophical structure of Van Til’s thought and therefore should be read *last* by those who are new to the field of theoretical apologetics. They will profit most greatly by reading Parts I, III, IV, and II in that order.

In Part I, “My Credo,” Prof. Van Till sets himself to explaining

in non-philosophical terms precisely what he proposes as a consistently Christian apologetic. He especially wants to show that the Christian's commitment to the "self-attesting Christ of Scripture" implies a theological and apologetic method which *excludes* the use of inter-subjective criteria or methods common to both Christians and non-Christians either to settle religious disputes or to answer religious questions.

Part II, "Letters from Three Continents," is composed of the two major essays by Hendrik G. Stoker and Herman Dooyeweerd and the responses by Dr. Van Til. Stoker, in his "Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Prof. Dr. Cornelius Van Til," develops *philosophically* the point of view expressed in Van Til's "Credo." He compares Van Til's Calvinistic epistemology to that of Dooyeweerd (whose *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* is itself an attempt at developing such a Calvinistic life and world view) and finds in Van Til's theory of knowledge a more profound and biblical understanding of the *condition humaine*. Herman Dooyeweerd, "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought," responds to Van Til's criticism of his "transcendental" method. He maintains that Van Til misunderstands him and does so because of vestiges of scholastic and rationalistic elements in his thinking.

In Prof. Van Til's responses he finds basic agreement with Stoker's interpretation of his thought, while he spends considerable effort in a detailed critique of Dooyeweerd's "transcendental" method, finding in it a pervasive inconsistency and a virtual denial of Reformed theology. In so doing Van Til clarifies his own position, differentiating it from the Dutch school of Calvinistic philosophy.

* * * * *

Parts III and IV are concerned, respectively, with what might be called the "theologic question" (What do I believe?) and the "apologetic question" (Why ought I to believe what you believe?). The theological question, "What do I believe?," is not only of interest to theologians. While theologians *answer* the question, apologists concern themselves with (a) the meaning of the question; (b) devising an acceptable method to use as a tool in answering the question, and (c) drawing out the implications of such beliefs for the construction of an acceptable method of defending them.

Part III, "Essays in Theology and Theological Method," approaches the "theological question" from the perspective of the apologist. The

first five essays deal with the implications of the Christian's faith for apologetics.

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes begins by affirming that a Christian apologetic must "be founded on the testimony of Scripture to the nature of reality in its divine, its human, and its cosmic aspects." He then undertakes a survey of scriptural teaching in these areas.

J. I. Packer attempts to show "the link" between the Christian's belief in biblical authority on the one hand and his theological and apologetic method on the other. In addition he asks whether biblical authority can be maintained without a corresponding doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

Jack B. Rogers asks whether the current orthodox understanding of biblical authority, as derived uncritically from B. B. Warfield, is not a severe departure from the intent of the Westminster divines whom Warfield claimed to follow. Is not Van Til especially tempted to defend a scientific view of the origin and content of Scripture when such was never intended by the Westminster Confession?

C. Trimp, noting the fondness of such theologians as Berkouwer, Kähler, and Barth for the term "witness," inquires into its biblical meaning. He concludes that it is primarily used to refer to God's testimony on behalf of his Son, the aim of such testimony being the closing of the knowledge-gap between God and man.

John A. Witmer picks up a theme of Trimp regarding Christ's own self-witness and asks whether such theologies as those of J. A. T. Robinson, D. M. Baillie, R. Bultmann, and O. Dibelius can be called "Christian" when they include the rejection of Jesus' own self-consciousness and therewith his self-identification.

The next four essays in Part III deal with questions of theological method.

G. C. Berkouwer questions in his essay whether one may ever assume the correctness of the confessions of his church. He argues strongly for the primacy of exegesis over all man-made theological structures.

S. U. Zuidema finds in Rudolph Bultmann's theology a hermeneutic which rests on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Such a hermeneutic leads to a theology in which the traditional "theological question," "What do you believe?," is rejected in favor of the existential-theological question, "Whom do you believe in?" In this manner existential theology empties Christianity of all knowledge-content and reduces it to an ineffable encounter between the unknowable God and man. Zuidema argues that such a view actually hinders

rather than promotes "the existential encounter between God's kerygmatic revelation and the existential man and his *Gottesfrage*."

Paul K. Jewett, in a critical review of Van Til's *Christ and the Jews*, a monograph on the philosophically informed hermeneutics of Philo Judaeus, the Pharisees, and Martin Buber, poses several questions to Van Til regarding anti-Semitism, revelation, and history, maintaining that if Van Til had dealt with them in that monograph, the value of the work would have been greatly increased.

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., studies the debate between G. Vos and A. Kuyper over the "theological" character of the writings of the apostle Paul. He comes down heavily on the side of Vos, maintaining that Paul was indeed a theologian. He then attempts to draw implications from this for theological method.

The final two essays in this third section are by *Herman Ridderbos* and *William Lane*. Both attempt, in different ways, to handle historical problems: Ridderbos, the synoptic problem; Lane, the speeches of Paul recorded in the Book of Acts. They undertake this effort in such a way as to spell out at what points the Christian belief in biblical authority has implications for such historical studies.

Part IV, "Essays in Philosophy and Apologetics," contains papers on the "apologetic question," "Why ought I to believe what you believe?"

Traditionally, the question has been regarded as legitimate and answerable. From Justin Martyr to Thomas Aquinas to Bishop Butler, attempts have been made to satisfy the non-Christian's request for reasons, acceptable to him on his grounds, which indicate both the reasonableness and validity of the Christian's knowledge claims. Apologists who use this method in defending the Christian faith maintain that there are inter-subjectively ascertainable rational (logical and evidential) grounds which demonstrate, either conclusively or very probably, the truth of the Christian's assertions.

There have been some, however, who have challenged the propriety of the "apologetic question." They observe that the question itself assumes the existence of "common notions" in terms of which religious issues can be resolved. They maintain that there are no such "common notions." All such epistemological methods and criteria of truth, they say, only function as tools in the service of the religious presuppositions of the user. Therefore, there can be no such methods as can be used "neutrally" with respect to religion. In view of this, the only form of "argument" possible is "argument by presupposition." The Christian presents his faith as a totally co-

herent, world and life view which is identified and authenticated by God and God alone. Cornelius Van Til is generally regarded as the "father of presuppositionalism" in the United States.

The first five essays in Part IV deal with the implications of the presuppositionalist position for philosophy.

Robert D. Knudsen, Prof. Van Til's associate at Westminster Seminary, provides a clear introduction to the whole subject of evangelical apologetics, showing the inter-relations between various schools of thought. He then closes by suggesting that Van Til's method itself suffers from several internal difficulties as well as clear incompatibilities with the Christian philosophy which has been developed by Herman Dooyeweerd.

J. P. A. Mekkes in a study of "knowing" maintains that in so far as the Christian world view is a total conception it involves a reconstruction, along biblical lines, of the whole idea of "knowing" which, he says, is completely dominated by Western philosophical constructions wholly foreign to Christian faith.

Gilbert B. Weaver compares Van Til's view of analogy with that of Thomas Aquinas, seeking to find out whether Gordon Clark's charge that they are the same is well founded.

C. Gregg Singer finds in Van Til's philosophy of history a re-statement of some of the basic themes of Augustine. He notes that Van Til draws conclusions consistent with presuppositionalism when he rejects all attempts at reading the "meaning" of history from history itself, but rather finds the interpretation of history given to us only in special revelation.

Rousas John Rushdoony analyzes the one-many problem of classical philosophy and says that only in Van Til's working out of this problem in terms of the many-in-one of the Trinity does one find an answer to it.

The final seven essays of the symposium deal with problems associated with the debate between those who adhere to the traditional method of apologetics and the presuppositionalists. The first four are in pairs: Lewis and Horne; Montgomery and Reid.

Gordon H. Lewis defends the traditional approach as it is found in the writings of Edward John Carnell. He finds a fundamental agreement between Van Til and Carnell in that both affirm, he says, a "logical starting point" common to Christians and non-Christians. Both also deny, he continues, the existence of any theoretically "metaphysical" common ground. He accuses Van Til, however, of

begging the "apologetic question" when he assumes that the Bible is self-authenticating.

Charles M. Horne, contrasting Van Til and Carnell, says that Van Til's apologetic method assumes that all men have everything in common metaphysically and nothing in common conceptually. He concludes that Carnell and Van Til hold radically different positions. He ends his paper with a chart of the various apologetic-theological positions.

John Warwick Montgomery argues that if the traditional approach is rejected because of lack of common ground, then all argument for Christian faith ceases. He proposes that all men will accept the weight of historical evidence, for "all men can compare alternative interpretations of fact and determine on the basis of the facts themselves which interpretation best fits reality."

W. Stanford Reid asks whether Montgomery's "probabilistic objectivism" is tenable. He argues that Montgomery's optimistic view of man in religious matters is unscriptural and that Montgomery cannot really account theoretically for the biblical emphasis on the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The fifth essay, by *Clark H. Pinnock*, is an attempt to show that in rejecting the "apologetic question" Van Til commits himself to a "curious epistemology derived from a modern Calvinistic school in Holland" which has led him "to align his orthodoxy with a form of irrational fideism." He proposes, in opposition, an "inductive method applied to the cosmic and historical stuff of revelation."

The sixth and seventh papers seek for a further understanding of Van Til's position.

Arthur F. Holmes wants to find out whether he and Van Til have basic agreements or disagreements. He accomplishes this by asking Van Til if he will follow him as he attempts to deal with such modern problems as "subjectivity," "informal logic," and the "meaning of religious discourse."

Frederic R. Howe questions whether Van Til has not made an exegetical and systematic mistake in correlating "witnessing for" and "defending" one's faith. Looking at Van Til's essay, "Mr. Black, Mr. White, Mr. Grey," he says that at numerous points *kerygma* is viewed as inseparable from *didache*.

* * * * *

The reader must now go to the essays themselves and apply himself to the issues involved. Many will want to pursue the issues

further in works outside this volume. In this connection the very thorough bibliography of the works of Prof. Van Til which appears at the end of the volume will be helpful. I wish to thank Arthur Kuschke, the librarian of Westminster Theological Seminary, and his staff for preparing it.

E.R.G.

PART ONE

MY CREDO

By

CORNELIUS VAN TIL

Cornelius Van Til

MY CREDO

How can I express my appreciation adequately for the honor you have conferred on me by your contributions to this *Festschrift*?

I shall try to do so first by setting forth in this, my "Credo," a general statement of my main beliefs as I hold them today. Then I shall deal separately with the problems and objections some of you have raised in respect to my views in separate response to the essays themselves. I hope that by doing this we may be of help to one another as together we present the name of Jesus as the only name given under heaven by which men must be saved.

I. The Self-Attesting Christ of Scripture

The self-attesting Christ of Scripture has always been my starting-point for everything I have said. What this implies for various problems will appear more clearly, I hope, as I go along. Allow me in this section to illustrate what I mean by recalling the incident of Jesus' healing of the man who had the palsy. When Jesus said to this man, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee," certain of the scribes reasoned in their hearts, "Why does this man thus speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?" (Mark 2:5, 6). Over and over "the Jews" charged Jesus with blasphemy. For it they nailed him to the cross.

These "Jews," call them "Pharisees," were very "orthodox." They swore by Moses and the prophets. Abraham was their father, and the God of Abraham was their God. "We thank thee, God, that we are not polytheists as other nations are." There is and there can be only one God. "Hear; O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4).

When Jesus, therefore, claimed to be one with the Father they were certain that he blasphemed. What an outrage for Jesus, a mere man, to claim that he was the Son of God. Away with him from the face of the earth!

What zeal this was for the one God, the only true God, the God of Moses! Of course, they did not like to put any man to the torture

of crucifixion. But the God of Moses wills it; we must save the people from their sentimental love for this man. Soon it appeared that they had indeed "saved" the people. "Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber" (John 18:40).

The irony of it all—the leaders of the Jews did not love and serve the God of Abraham at all! Like the nations about them, and especially the Greeks, they had become worshipers of the creature rather than the Creator! They made their own apostate moral consciousness the standard of right and wrong. With their notion of a "living Torah" they were able, so they thought, to do justice to the changelessness of the law and, at the same time, to live according to the principles of the "new morality."

It is in the face of this Pharisaic opposition that Jesus' assertion of his identity as Son of God and Son of man stands out in its significance. Every fact in dispute between the Pharisees and Jesus involved the ultimate claim that Jesus was the Son of God, and, as such, the promised Messiah. Jesus told the Pharisees, in effect, that they had twisted beyond recognition the meaning of every word of the Old Testament.

It was natural, therefore, that they should think of Jesus as a blasphemer. Not that the idea of blasphemy could have any meaning on their view of things. If Jesus' claim to be the promised Messiah, the Son of God, were true, then they, the Pharisees, were reactionaries, revolutionaries, apostates. They were intellectually, morally, and spiritually wrong in everything they said and did. Could they admit that Jesus was right when he said that they were of their father the devil? Could Jesus be right when he said that though they were lineal descendants of Abraham yet, spiritually, Abraham was not their father at all? Could Jesus be right when he said: "But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you" (John 15:42)?

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 meant when he said: *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*. I have learned something of what it means to make my every 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!* I am not a 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.

II. Christ Writes Me a Letter

I have never met Christ in the flesh. No matter, he has written me a letter. Not he, himself. He chose helpers. By his Spirit, the Spirit of truth, these helpers wrote what he wanted me to know. From heaven my Lord then sent his Holy Spirit on Pentecost to dwell in the hearts of all those whom he came into the world to redeem. I am, by his grace, one of them. Together we form the church, his people. In us and through us he establishes his kingdom. As a soldier of the cross, strengthened by his power in the inward man, I fight daily against Satan, who seeks at every point to establish his own kingdom in the hearts and to the hurt of men.

In his letter Jesus tells me that all men are made of one blood because all are created by God. As such all men are God's children; they all bear his image. But the first pair, from whom all later generations of men came "by ordinary generation," sinned against God. God set before them the ideal of joy which he would give them if they led their lives in the direction he indicated to them. That direction was to be marked by love and obedience to their Maker and benefactor. But our first parents had a person-to-person confrontation with Satan. Satan told them how free he had become since declaring his independence of God. To be self-determining man must surely be able to decide the "nature of the good"—regardless of what God says about it.

Adam saw Satan's point. "You are right, Satan, I must first decide

whether such a God as often speaks to us (1) knows what the 'good' for us is, (2) controls history so that he can determine what will happen if we disobey him, and (3) has the right to demand obedience from us. After I decide these issues, and if the answer is 'yes,' then I shall obey him. Certainly not before."

But by taking to himself the right to decide these issues, Adam had already decided them—in the negative. If God is such a one as knows the "good" for us, controls whatsoever comes to pass, and has the right of unquestioned obedience, then man obeys his word because it is *his* word. Adam, in disobedience, became a "free" man.

But Satan miscalculated. Refusing to believe that God controls the course of history, Satan began his attempt to take over the whole of mankind to himself. Having succeeded with the first Adam, he tried his trick on the Second Adam. But the Second Adam replied to Satan's scheme, "Get thee behind me, Satan," and, "It is written"! The Second Adam both knew and received the Word of God, for he was God, the Word. He lived his life according to what he, in his program, had written down in advance. Even the words, "I thirst," spoken on the cross, were spoken in accord with what was written.

Now what was written consisted chiefly in his promise to his people that he would, in the face of Satan and his hosts, redeem them from their sin. He would be their *Great High Priest* by giving himself as their substitute. "Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree." He would be their *Prophet*, like unto Moses, proclaiming the final word of deliverance to his people, establishing them in the truth in the face of Satan's effort to make them believe the lie. He would be their *King*, establishing his elect nation of "holy ones" against the effort of Satan to establish a kingdom based upon the self-righteousness of the Pharisees.

He came, he saw, he conquered: there was a transition from wrath to grace in history. The new age had come, the age of grace and glory. In his letter Jesus tells us of this new age. Much of this letter comes to us through his servant Paul. Much of the early growth of Christ's kingdom came through the work of his servant Paul. How did Paul tell the story of the Christ?

In Romans Paul tells us of the wayward path of mankind. Both Jews and Greeks, being from the beginning of the world confronted with the truth of God, have nevertheless exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. Since they chose not to have God in their knowledge, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against these men who hold