

AN INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

PROLEGOMENA AND THE DOCTRINES OF
REVELATION, SCRIPTURE, AND GOD

CORNELIUS
VAN TIL

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY WILLIAM EDGAR


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

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the King James Version or from the American Standard Version.

Page design by Lakeside Design Plus

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Van Til, Cornelius, 1895–1987

An introduction to systematic theology : prolegomena and the doctrines of revelation, scripture, and God / Cornelius Van Til ; edited by William Edgar.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-0-87552-789-5 (pbk.)

I. Theology, Doctrinal. I. Edgar, William, 1944– II. Title.

BT75.3.V36 2007

230—dc22

2007018614

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INTRODUCTION

BY WILLIAM EDGAR

The main title of this volume, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, could give the wrong impression. That is why a subtitle has been added in this edition. For this is not a survey of systematic theology, but an *introduction*, in the sense of a foundation, a theological and philosophical underpinning. Thus, unlike Louis Berkhof's *Introduction to Systematic Theology* or Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, this book is limited to what was called, in the older terminology, the *prolegomena*. As such, it covers the nature and method of systematic theology, the question of knowledge (epistemology), and revelation, both general and special. But unlike most *prolegomena* the book does venture into theology proper, or the doctrine of God. The reason for this selection, clearly, is that Cornelius Van Til is concerned first and foremost for apologetics, the defense of the faith.

He says it himself in the preface to the 1971 edition of the work (originally penned in 1936): "The present syllabus has an apologetic intent running through it"; to which he adds that these days, in order to generate Reformed theology, apologetics is a necessary undergirding. That is especially the case since apologetics of the right kind can help wrench us out of our man-centered outlook. In Van Til's view, Immanuel Kant has so defined the contemporary playing field that both philosophy and theology have been controlled by his method ever since. The essence of Kant's approach, as Van Til points out, is to make the human being, not God, the final reference point in all predication. That is to say, if we are to make sense out of anything, the presupposition for assigning meaning and value to all of reality is human autonomy. Kant is a watershed figure because of his bold achievement,

the “Copernican revolution” of thought. Instead of reality coming to us already defined from the outside, we define reality from inside our heads. Or, to bring it more up-to-date, describing a post-Marxist approach, Van Til cites as an example of such autonomy what Collingwood calls *historical consciousness*, which has become the agreed basis for our method of thinking.

There is nothing new in centering predication and knowledge on the human being, of course. So Kant is not radically new. Still, he represents a sea-change because of the degree to which his commitment to rationalism has influenced the succeeding generations. His work would eventually spell the death of metaphysics in most of the leading Western philosophies. Metaphysics pursues questions about being (ontology) and the universe (cosmology). Placing them in an absolute realm beyond science, Kant intended to protect them from rational assault. The effect, however, was that they eventually lost their relevance.

Nietzsche famously pointed out that Kant’s unknowable absolute world is not consoling, redeeming, or obligating, and is therefore useless. At present there seems no end to the permutations stemming from anti-metaphysical views. Nietzsche’s descendants cynically reduce knowledge to power. The varieties of hermeneutical philosophies informally known as “postmodern” are an attempt to find some sort of meaning when “metanarratives” can no longer be believed. Heidegger suggested rediscovering being through poetry. Instead of knowing objective truth, however, what we have is *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world, including human consciousness. Our principal task should be the hermeneutics of *Dasein*. Heidegger indirectly engendered various post-structuralist thinkers, such as Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva. For them, there is no ultimate meaning, only this-worldly preoccupations. Derrida, for example, rejects any nostalgia for being, and *deconstructs* any attempts at reintroducing humanism, yet goes on to suggest that we find our identity in language. Thus, for many of those thinkers, traditional meaning is devastated, and we are left only with the fragments, as though one had decided to shatter a beautiful vase and look for its qualities in some of the chips.

Certain theologians have attempted to enter into an alliance with these kinds of post-Kantian views, affirming the possibility of a Christian faith untainted by metaphysics and rational pretensions. They make bold attempts to identify the risk of faith with models such as dialectics or post-modernism. The Roman Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo suggests we embrace a “non-religious Christianity,” which is free from the pretensions of philosophy that seeks to understand reality in purely rational

terms. He affirms that the positive aspect of the tragic march of human history is the revelation of the principle of *humiliation*, which centers in the incarnation of Christ, whose own humiliation led to the redemption of the world.¹

Various post-evangelical Protestants espouse their own versions of these schools. Stanley Grenz was drawn to postmodern models advocating, as he did, a christological center and a “non-linear” outline for redemption, over against the older creation-fall-redemption ground motive.² The problem with such accommodations is that they are not able to relate the human creature with God the Creator in objective categories. Lacking a true theology of the Creator-creature relationship, they cannot assert the historical nature of the fall into sin from the state of integrity. And because of this they cannot fully appreciate the moral revolution that led to the fall, and so the problem in the human condition is not so much moral guilt as it is finitude, at least to some extent. As a result, redemption is not fully of God’s mercy, with a transition from wrath to grace in history, through Christ. Instead they must grope after divine liberation, turning revelation into a projection of the self, rather than seeing it as God’s merciful self-disclosure to fallen humanity.

To offer an authentic alternative, Van Til makes the strongest plea, in the present volume and throughout his writings, for the right kind of connection between the Creator and the creature. At every turn, he sets forth the fully self-sufficient God of the universe. When God creates, the creature has meaning and significance only because of the Creator-creature distinction. This is not dualism, against which Van Til argues forcefully. Nor is it intellectualism, which relegates revelation to an abstract content quite distinct from the real world of the creation. The dualist and the intellectualist prize ideas over the real world. They look upward for meaning, but in abstraction from the revelation found in the flowers of the fields and the cattle on a thousand hills. Thinking to guard against providentialism, which claims to track the hand of God in all the events of history, dualists erect a wall between the supernatural and the natural. The result is that when there is revelation, it must “break through” the wall, and come lodge in particular persons, ideas, or events. Higher things, such as harmony, ideas, and freedom, somehow must be attained from where we are—below, with our limitations.

1. Gianni Vattimo, *Après la chrétienté: Pour un christianisme non religieux* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2004), 76, 103.

2. See, for example, Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 348.

Van Til argues forcefully against such dualism. Instead, he sees everything in creation as *separate* from a holy God yet *filled* with meaning on account of God's government and his revelation. This can be only if God's attributes are coterminous with his being. Yet he asserts that everything in creation reveals God: physical objects are particulars related to universals, which together reveal God; the laws of mathematics or the laws of logic are not higher realities or independent from the details of a created world; time itself is "God-created as a mode of finite existence."³ Even evil is a part of God's plan, though he is not the author of it.

How can the created world display both the unity and diversity, the immanence and transcendence defined by revelation? It is because of the *aseity* of God. God is God and needs no outside standard to define him. He is the Trinity, in which unity and diversity are equally ultimate. If one does not begin with the "ontological Trinity," then one necessarily falls into the dilemma of rationalism and irrationalism at the same time. Rationalism posits that truth can be known through unaided human reason. Irrationalism says that truth is not rational, but mysterious. Both are involved in unbelief, in varying degrees. Van Til refuses the dilemma and pleads for another way, which affirms that because of revelation, human understanding is true, though not exhaustive. Only God is "fully rational." Our rationality is derivative. It is not enough to say that we are *less* than God and that our knowledge is quantitatively smaller than his. As a matter of fact, we are qualitatively different.

How, then, can all things be related, and how can we know them truly? It is precisely because God is able to make a creature in his image, dependent yet significant. We may know truly, though not exhaustively. Indeed, Van Til makes astonishing statements about human knowledge. For example, he boldly asserts that "man knows something about everything that exists." Even the divine essence is known to us! He states that our knowledge and God's knowledge "coincide at every point," even though they are different in mode at every point.⁴ What allows him to claim such knowledge for the creature without centering the universe on some abstract principle common to God and man?

Again, it is because of who God is. As all-powerful, omnipresent, and self-contained in all his attributes, God can and does make himself known to his creatures. As absolutely self-conscious, God does *performe* reveal himself to his image-bearers. Being God's image does not mean

3. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 66.

4. *Ibid.*, 164.

we are only *capable* of receiving revelation, as though we were the right-sized “machines” for the appropriate “ghost” to fill. There is no third entity between the Creator and the creature; there are no ideas or patterns distinct from God according to which he had to create us.⁵ Being God’s image means we actually *are* conscious of God, constitutionally. Our inward consciousness is revelation, and it is the obvious corollary of an utterly sovereign God who nevertheless wills to create a universe outside of himself. The present volume explores the many aspects of this relationship.

* * *

Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) taught apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary for some fifty years, beginning in 1929 and retiring in 1972, and then teaching fairly regularly through 1979. A number of his books, such as the present volume, were originally class syllabi barely edited for publication, hence the unpolished nature of the prose. Though more than workbooks, they are not finely edited texts. There is quite a bit of repetition in this text. Nevertheless, the outline is quite clear. Van Til often wrote by way of copious commentary on certain issues and authors. True to form, here he comments extensively either on his chief opponents, such as Karl Barth, J. Oliver Buswell, and Gordon Clark, or on certain Reformed theologians whom he reveres, and so criticizes more gently. He devotes entire chapters to relevant texts by Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, and Valentine Hepp. The last chapters on the doctrine of God follow Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* rather closely.

Some may find this method pedantic because Van Til will often stage a running commentary on specific paragraphs of an author and footnote one page after the other. But it can also be argued that such a running commentary helps us learn about certain issues with greater depth, because no stone is left unturned. It also permits a certain care and fairness in treating the questions at hand. For example, Van Til wrestles with A. E. Taylor’s views in chapter 11. The issue is scriptural authority. According to Taylor, the creature is so separated from the Creator that the creature cannot ever be assured that what he or she knows is absolutely true. Van Til traces the idea down to the presupposition that man is the ultimate interpreter of reality and thus incapable of coming into contact with the absolute *given* of revelation. He then argues for the biblical view, which

5. *Ibid.*, 63.

states that God can get through, because “there is no absolutely *given* for God.” Taylor’s view carries the implication that God is not fully self-conscious. It also introduces the pagan idea that evil must be a part of the original universe. The thoroughness of Van Til’s survey of Taylor enables us to follow his argument more closely.

In another example, in chapter 5, Van Til takes a look at Valentine Hepp. He appreciates that Hepp has improved on Herman Bavinck’s view of reason, because he ties it to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This allows Hepp to level a robust criticism at empiricism and at pretended neutrality in thought. But then he points out that Hepp himself does not go far enough. For example, Hepp is not willing to critique Kant right from the foundation. He agrees with Kant that science may be justified on the basis of human reason, and he faults him only for not taking revelation seriously enough. The problem is that only when God is fully sovereign and when all depends upon his revelation can any human thought have validity at all. If Kant were correct in his view that human reason is ultimate, then there could be no science at all. This is a gentle but firm critique of Hepp. Further, he does not fully appreciate the noetic effects of sin. Following him in his comments of Hepp is enlightening.

Some of the argument is bold and yet subtle at the same time. For example, in chapter 8, while discussing the sense of deity, Van Til pauses to comment on whether intuition is more to be trusted than reasoning, as Scottish realism suggests. That possibility is plausible at first, inasmuch as intuition has not had as much chance to wander into large minefields of error as has ratiocination. At the same time, “reasoning is nothing but self-conscious intuition,” as he puts it, so that both are perverted by sin. This is a bold thought, in that it shines the light of biblical revelation about anthropology on the difficult question of intuition. Yet it is patient in the details as well.

In chapter 13, Van Til, as he does elsewhere, rather thoroughly discusses the famous Gordon Clark case (1944–48). A unique debate arose in the early years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church over the similarities and differences between God’s knowledge and human knowledge. The occasion for the discussion was Gordon Clark’s application for ordination. A “Complaint” against his views was expressed by twelve members of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, including Van Til. It argued that Clark’s views had the effect of correlating God’s knowledge and human knowledge in ways that blurred the line between Creator and creature. Although the Complaint was eventually denied, the issues raised were crucial to Van Til’s apologetic, and arguably to the future of Westminster

Theological Seminary. What was at stake, above all, were the primacy of revelation and the utter dependency of human knowledge, which is true, but, in Van Til's words, never comprehensive.

This book is decidedly full of fascinating considerations. In chapter 15 Van Til revisits his subtle differences with Bavinck, whom he otherwise admires no end. He discusses certain areas where theology and epistemology overlap. This becomes the occasion for his comments on subjects like innate and acquired knowledge, and also his unique approach to the classical proofs. In the seventeenth chapter, he presents the Trinity by combining traditional Reformed orthodoxy, as exemplified in Bavinck, with some insights of his own. He argues that God is not only one God in three persons, but is also one person! He does this, first, because it fits the data of revelation. The Bible everywhere speaks of God as one person. Second, he is zealous to avoid dividing the Godhead into two categories, his essence and the persons. For many, the essence is somehow more basic than the persons. Such a dichotomy is a concession to rationalism, which finds the persons more comprehensible than the essence. This spoils both the mystery of the Trinity and the accessibility of the Trinity. So for Van Til, God is one person and three persons.⁶

Throughout the volume Van Til shows himself to be a master of his sources. Although his rapid-fire style may give the impression of rushing to conclusions, the fact is he is able to back up every statement. Even when he renders a conclusion without walking us through the details of his source, it is apparent that he knows them. Those of us privileged to study with him remember well his ability to go as far into detail as was required when challenged about his views on a particular author or theme. Another impression is that he does not do very much scriptural exegesis. This he always admitted, though in certain sections of the present volume he does refer to biblical texts abundantly. The fact is that the Bible and the great confessions are in his bones. He exudes Scripture. He loves the confessions. And he thoroughly knows the classical writers, Augustine, Calvin, and Warfield. He interacts extensively with Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, Robert Bellarmine, Charles Hodge, William Mas-selink, and many others. He is also conversant with a good number of current writings on such subjects as inspiration, incomprehensibility, and the divine attributes. This is a man of deep learning, yet one who is aware that learning in itself is of little value.

6. A concern here might be the definition of *person*. In the church fathers, the concept was developed to help explain the relationship between Father and Son. If God is one person, to what does he relate? Can he be self-contained? But if person means more a center of consciousness, as Van Til would have it, then his suggestion becomes intriguing.

Admittedly some of the material is dense and hard going. Readers not naturally drawn to this kind of writing will need some patience in plowing through certain sections. And some of it is repetitive. Some of it seems unnecessarily combative. I sincerely hope the annotations in this new edition will help the process along. They explain a number of Van Til's major concerns. And it is helpful to remember that his greatest burden was that the church be deepened in its worship of God, longing for it to return to a full-orbed understanding of the gospel, and then to bring that gospel to all people. "It goes without saying," he concludes at the end of chapter 1, "that if all these benefits are to come to us as ministers and as a church, we must undertake our work in a spirit of deep dependence upon God and in a spirit of prayer that he may use us as his instruments for his glory."⁷

We could even say that Cornelius Van Til had a pastor's heart. To be sure, a volume such as this one is nothing like a catechism, or sermons for a congregation. Still, the minister's concern for God's people emerges throughout. He worries about intellectualism in the church, as we have seen. He reckons that the background for that particular tendency is a shallow view of sin, one that reduces it to misinformation rather than what it is, "a power of perversion in the soul." The answer to this radical distortion is the "glory of the saving power of God," which is for his people.⁸ Sometimes his pastoral concerns may catch the reader off guard. Van Til believed in the reality of prayer, and was not embarrassed to mention it in a technical book of philosophical theology. For example, in the midst of a specialized discussion of George Hendry and the Niebuhrs on the matter of the static nature of much theology, he remarks on God's personal activity, which confronts us everywhere. He then adds, "Therefore obedience to God's revelation is the proper attitude for man whether he is active in the laboratory or in the house of prayer."⁹

My mind goes back to a seminar we had with Dr. Van Til on modern theology in the 1960s. A student had made a presentation that did not exhibit the sort of critical acumen the professor expected of us. After the class he took a couple of us aside and asked whether our friend were spiritually all right. He led us in prayer for him.

* * *

7. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 7.

8. *Ibid.*, 130–31.

9. *Ibid.*, 166.

Both in the splendid smaller volume, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Pilgrim, 1976), and throughout the larger work, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1995), John M. Frame stresses the importance of Cornelius Van Til as a dogmatician who knows philosophy. Of course, it works the other way around as well. Accordingly, both titles are intentional. He is a theologian. And the latter volume is an analysis of Van Til's *thought* rather than of his *apologetic*. Frame states that "the most distinctive aspect of that apologetic was its consistency with Reformed theology."¹⁰ The point is controversial in the larger world of philosophy, but I believe it to be accurate and insightful. Many would draw a sharp line of separation between apologetics (or philosophical theology) and dogmatics. The idea that apologetics should deal exclusively with philosophical issues, using the discourse of philosophy rather than the religious language of theology, has a long pedigree, intensifying from the Enlightenment onward. G. W. Leibniz wrote on apologetic themes, such as theodicy, or the problem of evil, using mostly philosophical categories. Friedrich Schleiermacher did the same, delving also into anthropology and history. In our own time, we may think of William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, and even Alvin Plantinga in the same vein. Perhaps Karl Barth is different, although he would never claim to be doing apologetics, being quite opposed to it. When he does cover philosophy, though, it is not always fully connected to theology or exegesis.

But Van Til is first and foremost a theologian, whose brush is capable of broad, philosophical strokes. Readers used to today's specialization are regularly surprised at the ease with which Van Til moves from the Bible to philosophy to doctrine. For example, in chapter 10, which is about special revelation, he speaks of subjects ranging from the fall and the resurrection, to Kierkegaard, Arminianism, Calvin, the Roman Catholic Church, *ex nihilo* creation, Bishop Butler, miracles, Gordon Clark, Hebrew and Greek terms, Matthew Arnold, angelophany, Jesus Christ, and much more! All the while, he is discussing the necessity and modes of special revelation. Sometimes he makes the connections explicit. In another example, in chapter 14, we see the direct connection between philosophy, doctrine, and apologetics. That chapter, entitled, "The Apologetic Import of the Incomprehensibility of God," relates the doctrine of God's transcendence to difficulties not only in theologians such as J. O. Buswell, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner, but also in writers like Kierkegaard and, especially, the philosopher Hegel. Van Til's concern is that if

10. John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1995), 241.

we are not doctrinally clear, we cannot really challenge our contemporaries with the radical demands of the gospel. Defending a full biblical teaching on God's incomprehensibility, Van Til attacks modern rationalism and modern irrationalism. Any concessions to them, albeit by Christians, give away the hope that is in us. Thus, he concludes, "The result is failure to challenge modern man with the full gospel."

To put this another way, the discourse of theology is the discourse of worldview. This book, while it goes into considerable details on doctrinal and philosophical issues, is concerned to set forth the totality of the Christian worldview, centered in the gospel of Christ. Some of the names and controversies may be a bit dated. But the message is not. Studying it carefully will pay rich dividends.

The text of this edition of *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* is virtually identical with the original. It has been lightly edited for punctuation, consistency of capitalization and spelling, and grammar. Occasionally a word is modified either to modernize the meaning or to better fit the original intent. Also, a few parentheses shown in the typeface you are now reading have been added, which contain such items as translations from a foreign language or succinct explanations of terms. The main addition to this edition is the use of annotative footnotes, again in a distinct typeface from that used for Van Til's material, to provide longer explanations. Some of them expand on ideas in the hope of clarifying issues only briefly set forth in the text. Others refer the reader to sources, or to complementary passages in Van Til's other writings. Still others make comments on Van Til's approach and how he has been perceived. All these helps are offered in the hope of making the original text all the more accessible to today's readers.

PREFACE

The first “edition” of this syllabus appeared some thirty-five years ago. Its title then was *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Since then much has happened in theology. Yet the old syllabus is now made available again in a practically unaltered form. The author has dealt with the main developments of recent theology in other writings.

The most important of these is that of neoorthodoxy. Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*) is its main monument. The writer has dealt with neoorthodoxy in *The New Modernism* and in *Christianity and Barthianism*.

Barth’s theology was the basic background for The Confession of 1967. The writer dealt with this new confession in *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance*. The author believes that neoorthodoxy is Christian in name only, not in fact.

While neoorthodoxy was developing in Europe, a movement called new evangelicalism was developing in America. New evangelicalism sought to replace fundamentalism in its statement and defense of the historic Protestant faith. The author dealt with new evangelicalism as set forth by one of its chief exponents, Edward J. Carnell, in *The Case for Calvinism*. It is the author’s conviction that only the Reformed faith gives an adequate statement of biblical revelation, and that therefore it alone, and not a general Protestant theology, is equipped to deal with neoorthodoxy as the outstanding heresy of the day.

Meanwhile Professor Herman Hoeksema was preparing his work on *Reformed Dogmatics* (1966). Much good exegesis underlies

Hoeksema's work. However, the author cannot agree with his denial of common grace. The doctrine of common grace is, the author believes, based on sound biblical exegesis and forms an important element in a truly biblical theology and apologetic. In *Common Grace* these convictions are set forth.

During the same thirty-five years a dogmatic work of many volumes, based on much exegesis and extensive historical knowledge appeared. It is Dr. G. C. Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics* [1952–76]. Dr. Berkouwer's work is also contemporaneous in that he has, during this period, written extensively on the development both of Roman Catholic and of Barthian theology. During this period Berkouwer underwent a change of attitude toward both Roman Catholicism and Barthian teaching. This change was in the direction of a toning down of opposition to both movements. Back of this change in relation to Roman Catholic and neoorthodox theology is a change in his view of Scripture. This change in his view of Scripture is in the interest of doing greater justice than former Reformed theologians have done to the human element and, with it, the general historical character of scriptural revelation. The author has not been able to do adequate justice to Berkouwer's work; he has, however, taken note of it in various places and has devoted one small book to the subject. Its title is *The Sovereignty of Grace*.

The present syllabus has an apologetic intent running through it. A Reformed theology needs to be supplemented by a Reformed method of apologetics. This involves relating the historic Christian position to that of modern philosophy, as well as theology. But modern philosophy and theology find their most typical expression in the epistemology of Immanuel Kant and his recent followers.

In modern philosophy and theology even more obviously than in ancient philosophy, man is the final reference point in all predication. Robert G. Collingwood's philosophy illustrates this fact with remarkable clarity. Many existentialist philosophers and theologians as well as many process philosophers and theologians refer to Collingwood's idea of the historical consciousness in justification for their method of thinking.

The author has dealt with the British-American background of the "historical consciousness" in a syllabus, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, and, more briefly, with the German background of the historical consciousness in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*.

The Christian faith as a whole, as a unit, must be set over against the non-Christian faith as a whole. Piecemeal apologetics is inad-

equate, especially for our time. A Christian totality picture requires a Christian view of the methodology of science and philosophy, as well as a Christian view of theology. One cannot have a really Christian theology unless one also has a really Christian science and philosophy.

In trying to develop a Christian totality view, the writer has had much help from the *Philosophy of the Cosmologic Idea* as set forth by professors D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd of Amsterdam, and by professor H. G. Stoker of Potchefstroom. It was, in particular, Dr. Dooyeweerd's detailed analysis of the history of philosophy that was of much help. However, Dr. Dooyeweerd finds it impossible to agree with the present writer in making the full biblical position the transcendental presupposition of the possibility of predication. Dooyeweerd says that I am bringing in the religious problem prematurely. I, on the other hand, am convinced that unless one offers at the outset the totality interpretation of all reality as given in Scripture as the presupposition of the possibility of asking any intelligent question, one has not really offered the Christian position for what it really is. My first criticism of Dooyeweerd's views appeared in the syllabus *Christianity in Conflict* (mimeographed), and Dooyeweerd's criticism of my views and my reply to his criticism appear in *Jerusalem and Athens*.

A perusal of these materials may help the interested reader to see why the present syllabus reappears with little change from its earlier form.

My indebtedness to such former Reformed theologians as Louis Berkhof and, back of him, Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper, is apparent throughout.

THE IDEA AND VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

THE IDEA OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

We are to be concerned in this work with theology as the orthodox believer in Christianity understands it. The orthodox view of Christianity finds its most consistent expression in the Reformed faith.¹ Fundamental to everything orthodox is the presupposition of the antecedent self-existence of God and of his infallible revelation of himself to man in the Bible. Systematic theology seeks to offer an ordered presentation of what the Bible teaches about God.

Theology, therefore, is not to be defined as the science of religion. It is true that even Reformed theologians have sometimes thus defined it. A. A. Hodge says, "Theology, in its most general sense, is the science of religion."² However, in view of what the term *religion* has come to mean in modern times, it would be unfortunate to confuse

1. Van Til is using the term *orthodox* to mean conforming to right doctrine, not the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian church. The Reformed faith refers to the theology associated with the confessions of faith of the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century, in distinction to the Lutheran and Anabaptist branches of the Reformation. It purposes to return to the Scripture as ultimate authority, and thus to represent historic Christian orthodoxy from its origins, newly articulated at the Reformation, particularly in Calvin's theology, and up to the present day.

2. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1878; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 15.

the issue between modern non-Christian and orthodox theology by speaking of theology as the science of religion. Religion, according to the modern definitions given of it (for example, in the “psychology of religion” literature), has nothing to do with the God of the Scriptures. Men say that they can best obtain the “native witness” of religion if they leave out of consideration altogether the question of its objective reference.³ But since Christianity claims to be the true religion, it follows that for it the objective reference is of prime importance. It is the God of the Scriptures about whom we wish to obtain knowledge.

It does not follow from this that it is about God *alone* that we wish to obtain knowledge. It only means that it is *primarily* of God that we speak. We wish to know all that God wishes us to know about anything. The Bible has much to say about the universe. But it is the business of science and philosophy to deal with this revelation. Indirectly even science and philosophy should be theological.⁴ The Scriptures are also full of information about our salvation and about many other things that concern us. But it will not do to say on this account that man is the center of theology. All that the Scriptures say about man, and particularly all that they say about man’s salvation, is after all for the glory of God. Our theology should be God-centered because our life should be God-centered.

Again, there is much in the Scriptures about Christ. After the entrance of sin into the world, Christ is the only way through whom God can be known. He is not only the one through whom we can *more fully* than otherwise know the Father; it is through him *alone* that we can come to the Father. Furthermore, Christ is God, so that when we know him we know God. In spite of all this it should always be remembered that Christ’s work is a means to an end. Even if we think of the fact that Christ is the second person of the Trinity, we ought still to remember that it is the full Godhead with whom we ultimately have to do and about whom, in the last analysis, we wish to know. Hence, theology is primarily God-centered rather than Christ-centered.⁵

3. The “native witness” means the religious instinct, observed by anthropologists. Van Til insists on keeping orthodox theology clear from any such human source and method.

4. While the Bible belongs to *special* revelation, as the record of God’s saving deeds, culminating in the work of Christ, *general* revelation comes to us through the creation and our conscience, and is accessible to the sciences. Yet science is never done in a neutral fashion, but is either faithful or not to revelation.

5. Van Til makes the point here that God is a Trinity. He takes issue with an improper emphasis on the second person, known as *Christomonism*, which he finds in Karl Barth’s theology.

It is well to point out the relation of systematic theology to the other theological disciplines. The name *systematic theology* does not imply that the other theological disciplines do not do their work systematically. It means rather that systematics alone seeks to offer the truth about God as revealed in Scriptures as a *whole*, as a unified system.

Exegesis takes the Scriptures and analyzes each part of it in detail. Biblical theology takes the fruits of the exegesis and organizes them into various units and traces the revelation of God in Scripture in its historical development. It brings out the theology of each part of God's Word as it has been brought to us at different stages, by means of various authors. Systematic theology then uses the fruits of the labors of exegetical and biblical theology and brings them together into a concatenated system. Apologetics seeks to defend this system of biblical truth against false philosophy and false science. Practical theology seeks to show how to preach and teach this system of biblical truth, while church history traces the reception of this system of truth in the course of the centuries.⁶

About the matter of theological encyclopedia there has been a great deal of debate among Reformed theologians. There is only one point in this debate that we are here concerned to mention. That is the question of the relation of systematic theology to apologetics. On this point Dr. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, and with him the "Princeton school" of theology, differ from Dr. Abraham Kuyper and Dr. Herman Bavinck and the "Dutch school" of theology.⁷

The point of difference concerns chiefly the nature of apologetics. Warfield says that apologetics as a theological discipline has to establish the presuppositions of systematic theology, such as the existence of God, the religious nature of man, and the truth of the historical revelation of God given us in the Scriptures. In contrast to this,

6. This succinct presentation of the encyclopedia of the disciplines represents a framework for organizing knowledge, and the seminary curriculum. Particularly important is the three-part relationship between exegetical, biblical-theological, and systematic considerations. Note also the three carriers of systematics: apologetics, practical theology, and church history.

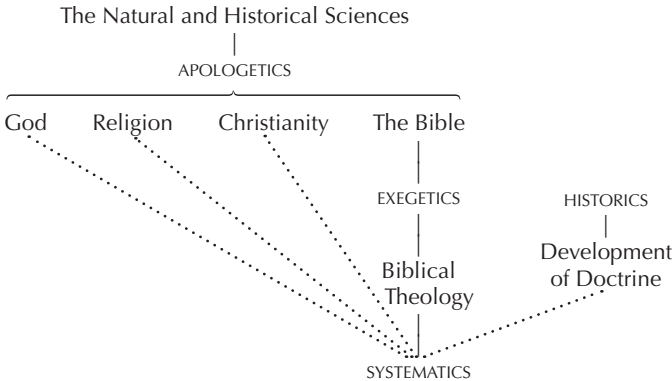
7. In what follows, Van Til outlines his interpretation of Warfield's and Kuyper's views of apologetics in relation to systematics. Warfield wants apologetics to come first, so that we can be sure the systematics we are elucidating are factually true to begin with. Kuyper wants apologetics to be a subset of dogmatics (systematics) and ethics, a discipline that deals with the assaults of philosophy. Although he does not agree with Kuyper that apologetics is only secondary and primarily negative, Van Til does side with him against Warfield, because apologetics should have neither content nor criteria that differ from systematics. It is not clear to this editor that Van Til did full justice to Warfield's position.

Kuyper says that apologetics must seek only to defend that which is given it in systematics.⁸ Warfield argues that if we were to follow Kuyper’s method, we would first be explicating the Christian system, and afterwards we would be asking ourselves whether perchance we had been dealing with facts or with fancies. Kuyper argues that if we allow apologetics to establish the presuppositions of theology, we have virtually attributed to the natural man the ability to understand the truth of Christianity and have thus denied the doctrine of total depravity.

We cannot and need not discuss this debate in detail. Kuyper’s basic contention that we must always keep in mind the distinction between the regenerate mind and the unregenerate mind need not imply that apologetics must come after systematics and must be negative only. Apologetics can very well come first and presuppose in general the system of truth brought out in systematics. It is true that the best apologetics can be given only when the system of truth is well known. But it is also true that the system of truth is not well known except it be seen in its opposition to error. Systematic theology itself has been developed, to a large extent, in opposition to error. The two disciplines are therefore mutually dependent upon one another.

On the other hand, we hold that the basic contention of Kuyper with respect to Warfield’s position is correct. Warfield often argues as though apologetics must use a method of approach to the natural man that the other disciplines need not and cannot

8. B. B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 57, and especially his scheme on p. 74 (reproduced below); Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries, “Introduction” by B. B. Warfield (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898).



use.⁹ He reasons as though apologetics can establish the truth of Christianity as a whole by a method other than that of the other disciplines because it alone does not presuppose God. The other disciplines must wait, as it were, till apologetics has done its work and receive from it the facts of God's existence, etc. This distinction between the method of apologetics and the method of the other disciplines we believe to be mistaken. *All the disciplines must presuppose God, but, at the same time, presupposition is the best proof.* Apologetics takes particular pains to show that such is the case. This is its chief task. But in so doing, it is no more neutral in its method than are the other disciplines. One of its main purposes is to show that neutrality is impossible and that no one, as a matter of fact, is neutral. We conclude then that apologetics stands at the outer edge of the circle of systematic truth given us by systematics in order to defend it.¹⁰

Some theologians prefer the name *dogmatic theology*, while others prefer to speak of *systematic theology*. This is not a matter of great importance. The reason why some prefer the term *dogmatics* is that it seems better than the term *systematics* to express the idea that we deal in this discipline with the dogmas or the truths of the church.¹¹ This brings up the question of the relation of systematics to the confessions of the church. Does systematics deal primarily with these confessions? Or should we say that systematics deals primarily with the *dogmas* or truths of Scripture? Basically, there is agreement among all leading Reformed theologians on this point. All agree that the dogmas of the church have been derived from the Scripture. Hence it is true that ultimately systematics seeks to expound the system of truth as given in the Scriptures. It was not till after a great deal of work had been done on the Scriptures by systematic theologians that the church was able to formulate its dogmas. The creeds of the church are, as far as their content is concerned, no more than a systematic statement of the truth of Scripture. They are distinguished from the systematic statement of Scripture given by systematic theology (a) by their brevity, limiting themselves as they do to the most essential matters; and

9. B. B. Warfield, "Apologetics," in *Studies in Theology*, 3–21.

10. The image of an outer edge signifies that apologetics is in effect a part of systematic theology, one that focuses on defense.

11. From the Greek, *dokeima*, an opinion; dogma has come to mean the instruction or doctrines of the church. Van Til is indifferent to the superiority of the nomenclature *systematic theology* versus *dogmatic theology*, as long as it is agreed that all doctrine be derived from the Scriptures first and only then put into systems or creeds.

(b) by their authoritative character, since they have been officially accepted as standards by the councils of the church.

Once these standards or dogmas of the church have been accepted, it goes without saying that a theologian who writes a work on systematics will write it in accordance with the interpretation given in those standards. To say that this hampers his freedom is to say that he has not himself freely adopted these creeds as a member of the church.¹² Moreover, to interpret in accordance with these standards does not mean that one ignores the Scriptures. It must be shown over and over again that the standards are based on the Scriptures. In addition to this, the systematic theologian has to go beyond the standards to see whether he can possibly find a more specific formulation of truths already spoken of in the standards, and whether he can find a formulation of truths of Scriptures not yet spoken of in the standards. In this way he may himself help in some small way the further implication of the church into the truth of Scripture. Creeds must be revised and supplemented from time to time. But it is not until systematic theology has progressed beyond the creeds that the creeds themselves can be revised.

It is of the utmost importance to note how creeds must be revised. The creed of the United Presbyterian Church, adopted in 1925, affords an instructive example of how creeds ought not to be revised. This creed proposes to be a revision of the Westminster Confession. However, it tones down the specific and exact teachings of Scripture found in the Westminster Confession to vague generalities. This sort of credal revision is *worse than useless; it is retrogressive*. What the church needs is a more exact formulation of its doctrines against heresies as they appear in every new and changing form, and a fuller statement of biblical truth.¹³

Warfield points out how it is true of any science that it seeks not less but more and more specific knowledge of its subject. He says:

In any progressive science, the amount of departure from accepted truth which is possible to the sound thinker becomes thus ever less and less, in proportion as investigation and study

12. Here and throughout, Van Til uses the masculine generically.

13. Van Til agrees that creeds can be improved, but only when systematics has progressed so that greater clarity and precision can be brought into the creeds. His critique of the revisions of 1925 are mild compared to his opposition to the Confession of 1967. See his *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967).

result in the progressive establishment of an ever increasing number of facts. The physician who would bring back today the medicine of Galen would be no more mad than the theologian who would revive the theology of Clement of Alexandria.¹⁴

THE VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

When we speak of the value of systematics, or, for that matter, of the value of any other theological discipline, we do not take the pragmatic position. The question of value is not the first question we should ask. The question of truth and of duty is primary. It is a God-given duty that we should take the content of Scripture and bring it together into a systematic whole. It is plain that we are required to know the revelation that God has given us. Yet we would not adequately know that revelation if we knew it only in its several parts without bringing these parts into relation to each other. It is only as a part of the whole of the revelation of God to us that each part of that revelation appears as it is really meant to appear. Our minds must think systematically. It is with our God-created minds, which must think systematically, that we must rework the content of revelation.

We may observe, however, that what is simply our plain God-given task is, at the same time, most profitable for our spiritual life.¹⁵ Warfield says:

We do not possess the separate truths of religion in the abstract; we possess them only in their relations, and we do not properly know any one of them nor can it have its full effect on our life . . . except as we know it in its relation to other truths, that is, as systematized. What we do not know, in this sense, systematically, we rob of half of its power on our conduct; unless indeed we are prepared to argue that a truth has effect on us in proportion as it is unknown. To which may be added that when we do not know a body of doctrine systematically, we are sure to misconceive the nature of more

14. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," 78. Galen was a physician and philosopher born in Pergamum, A.D. 129, and had considerable influence on the ancient world as well as European medicine, up until the nineteenth century. Clement of Alexandria, ca.150–215, a Greek father, is best known for calling philosophy the "handmaid" of theology, and for his studies on the Logos as the path to true knowledge.

15. In what follows, Van Til argues that because of our human heart-centered unity, the knowledge of systematic theology helps us steer away from extremes.

or fewer of its elements; and to fancy that that is true which a more systematic knowledge would show us to be false, so that our religious belief and therefore our religious life would become deformed and misshapen.¹⁶

The unity and organic character of our personality demands that we have unified knowledge as the basis of our action. If we do not pay attention to the whole of biblical truth as a system, we become doctrinally one-sided, and doctrinal one-sidedness is bound to issue in spiritual one-sidedness. As human beings we are naturally inclined to be one-sided. One tends to be intellectualistic, another tends to be emotional, and still another tends to be activist. One tends to be only prophetic, another only priest, and a third only king. We should be all these at once and in harmony. A study of systematic theology will help us to keep and develop our spiritual balance. It enables us to avoid paying attention only to that which, by virtue of our temperament, appeals to us.

Moreover, what is beneficial for the individual believer is also beneficial for the minister and in consequence for the church as a whole.¹⁷ It is sometimes contended that ministers need not be trained in systematic theology if only they know their Bibles. But “Bible-trained” instead of systematically trained preachers frequently preach error. They may mean ever so well and be ever so true to the gospel on certain points; nevertheless, they often preach error. There are many “orthodox” preachers today whose study of Scripture has been so limited to what it says about soteriology that they could not protect the fold of God against heresies on the person of Christ. Oft-times they themselves even entertain definitely heretical notions on the person of Christ, though perfectly unaware of the fact.

If we carry this idea one step further, we note that a study of systematic theology will help men to preach theologically.¹⁸ It will help to make men proclaim the whole counsel of God. Many ministers never touch the greater part of the wealth of the revelation of God to man contained in Scripture. But systematics helps ministers to preach the whole counsel of God, and thus to make God central in their work.

16. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 83.

17. The special responsibility of the minister as teacher is emphasized in this material. As signaled in his preface, Van Til highlights apologetics and connects it to the minister’s training in systematic theology.

18. Here Van Til argues that the knowledge of systematic theology ought to ensure a God-centered preaching, which avoids both worldliness and other-worldliness.

The history of the church bears out the claim that God-centered preaching is most valuable to the church of Christ. When the ministry has most truly proclaimed the whole counsel of God, the church has flourished spiritually. Then, too, it is well-rounded preaching of this sort that has kept the church from worldliness. On the other hand, it has kept the church from an unhealthy *otherworldliness*. Well-rounded preaching teaches us to use the things of this world because they are the gifts of God, and it teaches us to possess them as not possessing them, inasmuch as they must be used in subordination to the one supreme purpose of man's existence, namely the glory of God.

It is but natural to expect that, if the church is strong because its ministry understands and preaches the whole counsel of God, then the church will be able to protect itself best against false teaching of every sort. Non-indoctrinated Christians will easily fall prey to the peddlers of Russellism, spiritualism, and all of the other fifty-seven varieties of heresies with which our country abounds.¹⁹ One-text Christians simply have no weapons of defense against these people. They may be able to quote many Scripture texts which speak, for instance, of eternal punishment, but the Russellite will be able to quote texts which, by the sound of them and taken individually, seem to teach annihilation. The net result is, at best, a loss of spiritual power because of loss of conviction. Many times, such one-text Christians themselves fall prey to the seducer's voice.

We have already indicated that the best apologetic defense will invariably be made by him who knows the system of truth of Scripture best. The fight between Christianity and non-Christianity is, in modern times, no piece-meal affair. It is the life-and-death struggle between two mutually opposed life-and-world views.²⁰ The non-Christian attack often comes to us on matters of historical, or other, detail. It comes to us in the form of objections to certain teachings of Scripture, say, with respect to creation, etc. It may seem to be simply a matter of asking what the facts have been. Back of this

19. A reference to Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses. His distinctive approach to reading the Bible led to unorthodox doctrines. He taught that deciphering biblical chronology could determine key dates in history. The group denies the full divinity of Christ and teaches "annihilation," that is, the destruction of unbelievers rather than their eternal punishment. Van Til argues that Christians who take particular texts out of the context of the whole, and thus deny systematic theology, cannot effectively argue against Russell's followers or their ilk.

20. As he argues in other places, such as *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 128–35, the right apologetics is "by presupposition," opposing worldview against worldview, respecting the systems of belief and unbelief, rather than piecemeal, where factual claims merely compete with other factual claims.

detailed attack, however, is the constant assumption of the non-Christian metaphysics of the correlativity of God and man. He who has not been trained in systematic theology will often be at a loss as to how to meet these attacks. He may be quite proficient in warding off the attack as far as details are concerned, but he will forever have to be afraid of new attacks as long as he has never removed the foundation from the enemy's position.

It should not be forgotten in this connection that the minister's duty is increasingly that of an apologist for Christianity.²¹ The general level of education is higher than it has ever been. Many young people hear of evolution in the high schools and in the colleges where their fathers never heard of it except as a far distant something. If the minister would be able to help his young people, he must be a good apologete, and he cannot be a good apologete unless he is a good systematic theologian.

In conclusion, we should observe that just as a thorough knowledge of the system of truth in Scripture is the best defense against heresy, so it is also the best help for the propagation of the truth. This is but the other side of the former point. As an army well organized is not so likely to be overcome by a surprise attack and is not so likely to be shattered as an army poorly organized, so also an army well organized is better able to attack the enemy than an army poorly organized. Each unit will have the support and the protection of the whole army as it goes on to the attack. The morale will be better. When the enemy comes with cannon, we must be able to put atomic bombs over against them. When the enemy attacks the foundations, we must be able to protect these foundations.

The church will have to return to its erstwhile emphasis upon its teaching function if it is to fulfill its God-given task of bringing the gospel to all men. Its present recourse to jerky evangelism as almost the only method of propaganda is itself an admission of paupery. It is remarkable that what the church, generally speaking, still does in the way of teaching is shot through with modernism.²² The propaganda of orthodoxy seems to be limited almost exclusively to evangelization in the narrow sense of the term. When this propaganda turns

21. For Van Til, this is not simply from personal interest. The times require apologetics. Further, good apologetics is rooted in good theology.

22. "Modernism" refers to views that oppose the historic Christian view, despite surface resemblances to it. The term was favored by J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), the intellectual leader of the orthodox in their controversies against liberal theology in the early twentieth century.

to teaching as a means, it all too frequently employs uncritically the conceptions of “reason” and “fact” as these are understood by those who make no profession of Christianity. The result is that there is no teaching of Christianity as a challenge to unbelief. Revivalists ought to make themselves unnecessary as quickly as possible. Orthodoxy must take over the teaching function of the church anew, and do it with a better knowledge of the requirements of that work than ever before.²³

It goes without saying that if all these benefits are to come to us as ministers and as a church, we must undertake our work in a spirit of deep dependence upon God and in a spirit of prayer that he may use us as his instruments for his glory.

23. Van Til is sharply critical of evangelists (“revivalists”) whose methods cannot really challenge unbelief, because they do not do justice to a full-orbed Christian position. Their apologetics thus fails to uncover the biased view of such areas as “reason” and “fact,” which are never neutral.