THE DOCTRINE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

JOHN M. FRAME

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A THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

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ANALYTICAL OUTLINE

PREFACE

This book was written as a text for my course at Westminster Theological Seminary in California called The Christian Mind. The course, an introduction to theology and apologetics, begins with a brief introduction to the Reformed faith, which is followed by a unit on the Word of God, and ends with discussions of some problems of apologetics (e.g., the existence of God, the problem of evil). In between those two units—Word of God and problems of apologetics—comes a section on the theology of knowledge (Christian epistemology if you will), which is the subject of this volume.

The arrangement of my course will explain why in this book I am so dogmatic as to assume Reformed theology without argument, especially on matters such as biblical inerrancy. I trust that in the future I may be able to publish materials that cover the other areas of my course. If the reader is not sympathetic to my general theological views, however, I do ask his patience; he may well find that some of this material will be helpful to him nevertheless. Also, I hope that this book will help some readers from other theological orientations to see an orthodox, Reformed position "from the inside." I hope to show such readers, in some measure, the richness of the theological resources available to Reformed orthodoxy and thereby to make that position more attractive to them. Thus, rather indirectly, this book constitutes a sort of argument for my theological position—to those readers willing to give me some benefit of the doubt.

Indeed, readers of all theological positions will have to give me some of that benefit! As I read over the manuscript, there seems to be something in it to create difficulties for almost every kind of reader. Some of it is far too difficult for those without theological training (e.g., the sections on anti-abstractionism and the basis of logic); other parts may seem too simple for those *with* theological training (e.g., the material on apologetic method). Some parts merely gather together traditional ideas that have been stated by other authors (e.g., Van Tillian presuppositionalism, Van Til's rationalist-irrationalist dialectic). Other parts are rather new, at least in an orthodox context (theology as application, multiperspectivalism,

appreciation for subjectivism, anti-anti-abstractionism, critiques of biblical and systematic theology, polemic against the ideal of total precision in theology, attack on word-level criticism, attack on "logical order," etc.). Thus I manage to offend both the traditionalists and the avant-garde.

Also, I keep feeling that at most points in the book more argument would be helpful. Yet the book is already terribly long, and one of my theses is that theological argument has to start and stop somewhere. Not everything can be argued to everyone's satisfaction. I do believe that for those readers willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, the book is sufficient to present at least the main lines of an adequate argument for its positions. For those who are not willing to give me that benefit—well, I may not be the one suited to help you.

Another group I possibly may have offended is women readers or at least women (and men) who share certain current feminist ideas about the use of language. On the one hand, our language is changing somewhat in a nonsexist direction, and I have often found myself writing "human beings" or "persons," rather than "men," in certain contexts. On the other hand, I confess that I have not always avoided the generic masculine pronouns; I have not always written "he or she" in place of the traditional "he" when referring to an indefinite subject. I have, for example, referred to "the theologian" as "he," rather than as "he or she" or (as often in recent publications) as "she."

My practice does not reflect a belief that women cannot be theologians. Quite the contrary. For according to this book, everyone is a theologian! I do believe that only men are called to the teaching eldership of the church, but the interest of this book is broader than that. Why, then, do I resist, to some extent, the trend toward "nonsexist" language? (1) To use "he or she" in place of "he" as a generic pronoun still sounds awkward to me. Possibly that will change in ten or twenty years, but I am writing in 1986. (2) The English language is complete without the new circumlocutions. The generic use of the masculine pronoun does not exclude women. (Look up *he* in the dictionary.) Thus the new language is linguistically superfluous. (3) Theologically, I believe that God ordained man to represent woman in many situations (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3), and so the generic masculine pronoun has an appropriateness that is more than merely linguistic. Not that it would be wrong to replace it with "he or she" for some purposes; it would be wrong, however, to condemn the older language. (4) I realize that language changes and that one must, to some extent, "go with the flow." I resent attempts, however, to change language in the interest of a political ideology, especially one that I do not entirely agree with! I feel an obligation to accept linguistic change when it arises out of the "grass roots," out of some cultural consensus. When people

try to impose it through political pressure, however, I believe that I have a right, for a time at least, to resist. (5) Are women offended by the generic pronouns? I doubt that many of them are. Probably the ones offended are mostly "professional" feminists. I do not believe, in any case, that women have a *right* to be offended, for the generic language, in fact, does not exclude them (see *(2)*, above). Furthermore, I think that the professional feminists themselves are guilty of insulting women when they claim that this language is offensive. For they are saying, in effect, that women do not understand the English language, because they are offended by language which, according to the dictionary, is nonoffensive. (6) Most importantly, this is not a book about "women's issues," and therefore I do not want to use locutions that will distract the reader's attention, making him (or her!) think about women's rights when I want him to think about, for example, situational justification.

For many readers, this book will be a reference text. Few will bother to read it all the way through (though I may force my students to do so!). That is fine, but such readers should recognize that the book is a connected argument and that material toward the end may be a trifle bewildering (though not entirely unhelpful) to one who has not read the preceding sections. But such directions may be superfluous. Most readers, I trust, read with common sense.

I wish to acknowledge the help of many who have contributed to my thinking in general and to this book in particular. Thanks to my mother and (now deceased) father who tolerated a lot of theological nonsense from me in my formative years. To Bob Kelley and Alberta Meadowcroft, who first excited my fascination with God, with Jesus Christ, and with the Christian life. To John Gerstner, who first introduced me to serious and rigorous theological thinking and who showed me that such thinking was possible within, even demanded by, an orthodox Christian confession. To Pastor Ed Morgan, Dr. Donald B. Fullerton, and the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship, who challenged me to study Scripture in depth, reminding me that God's answers are the most important in all areas of life. To two Princeton professors: Dennis O'Brien, a slightly unorthodox Roman Catholic who started me thinking in a "perspectival" direction, and the late Walter Kaufmann, who for all his militant anti-Christianity managed to teach me that philosophy and theology could be fun. To Cornelius Van Til, the chief intellectual influence of my seminary years and beyond. To other seminary professors, especially Edmund P. Clowney, Meredith G. Kline, and John Murray, who showed me riches in the Scriptures beyond my most fantastic imaginings. To Paul Holmer, my advisor at Yale, who planted many seed thoughts in my head (doubtless he will be appalled to discover what I have

done with them!). To many students and colleagues with whom I have had profitable discussions, especially Greg Bahnsen, Vern Poythress, Jim Jordan, Carl Ellis, Susanne (Klepper) Borowik, and Rich Bledsoe. To John Hughes, who painstakingly edited and typeset this volume and made a great number of valuable suggestions. To Lois Swagerty and Jan Crenshaw, who typed portions of the manuscript. To all the Dombeks and all the Laverells, whose Christian friendship nurtured and strengthened me in many ways. To the faculties and boards of the Westminster Theological Seminaries (of Philadelphia and Escondido) for their many encouragements and for their patience in accepting me for so many years as a (relatively) unpublished professor. To Dick Kaufmann, whose precious ministry of the gospel has constantly renewed my faith. To my dearest Mary, the kindest, sweetest, most godly human being I know, whose love has sustained me and has motivated me to persevere in my work. And finally, "to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen" (Rev. 1:5–6).

Introduction

EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE THEOLOGICAL CURRICULUM

Calvin's *Institutes* begins not with a discussion of scriptural authority or of the doctrine of God, as have most Reformed theologies since Calvin, but with a discussion of the "knowledge of God." The topic with which an author begins a book is not necessarily "central" or "foundational" to his thinking, but clearly the *Institutes* begins with a subject very close to Calvin's heart. In the *Institutes*, "knowledge of God" is both basic and distinctive, since there is very little that compares with it in the writings of Calvin's predecessors or successors. The point is not that in his historical context only Calvin wrote extensively about knowing God. Many people wrote on this subject as they considered the knowability and incomprehensibility of God, human reason, faith, illumination, revelation, Scripture, tradition, preaching, the sacraments, prophecy, the incarnation, and so forth. And of course many people wrote about salvation, which (as we shall see) is virtually equivalent to the "knowledge of God," viewed from a certain perspective. Yet it seems that Calvin was uniquely fond of the phrase "knowledge of God," and that fondness signals a preference that is more than merely linguistic. For Calvin, "knowledge of God" was a "foundational" concept, a concept by means of which he intended to bring all of his other concepts into focus, a concept by which he sought to make all his other concepts understood. The "knowledge of God" is not the only "central" concept in Calvin, nor is it necessarily the most important. Unlike many modern writers, Calvin was not a "theologian of" this or that (the Word, personal encounter, self-understanding, crisis,

process, hope, liberation, covenant, the resurrection, or even "knowledge of God"). Yet Calvin recognized "knowledge of God" as one important *perspective* through which the whole Bible can be helpfully understood, as one useful means of summing up the whole biblical message, as well as being a key to certain specific areas of biblical teaching.

Where did Calvin get this remarkable idea? Doubtless through his own study of Scripture. We tend to forget how often in Scripture God performs His mighty acts so that men will "know" that He is Lord (cf. Exod. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29f.; 10:2; 14:4, 18; 16:12; Isa. 49:23, 26; 60:16; etc.). We tend to forget how often Scripture emphasizes that although in one sense all people know God (cf. Rom. 1:21), in another sense such knowledge is the exclusive privilege of God's redeemed people and indeed the ultimate goal of the believer's life. What could be more "central" than that? But in our modern theologizing—orthodox and liberal, academic and popular—this language does not come readily to our lips. We speak much more easily about being saved, born again, justified, adopted, sanctified, baptized by the Spirit; about entering the kingdom, dying and rising with Christ; and about believing and repenting than we do about knowing the Lord. For Calvin, there was no such reticence. He was quite at home with the scriptural language; he made it truly his own. And in doing so, he unlocked a rich treasury of biblical teaching of which we are largely ignorant today.

But we do hunger for it. Questions about knowledge—epistemological questions—are a preoccupation of our time. The basic questions raised by Hume and Kant have made modern philosophers (as well as scientists, theologians, artists, sociologists, psychologists, etc.) deeply obsessed by the problems of what we can know and how we can know. Such topics also frequently dominate discussions among nonacademic Christians: How can I know that the Bible is true? How can I know that I am saved? How can I know God's will for my life? How can we, with twentieth-century American biases and prejudices, really know what Scripture means? The biblical doctrine of the knowledge of God was not concocted as an answer to Hume and Kant or to modern skepticism in general or to ancient skepticism, for that matter. It primarily addresses questions of a different sort. But it *does* also address the modern questions in a powerful way.

And there are signs that God (in His mysterious historical slowness, which is never too late) is teaching these truths again to His church. Many useful articles have been written in biblical journals and dictionaries about the concept of "knowledge" in Scripture. And there are even some books on this topic (see the Bibliography). F. Gerald Downing's *Has Christianity a*

Revelation?[1] (he answers, No) goes to some rather absurd extremes but along the way says some very helpful things about revelation and knowledge in Scripture. Cornelius Van Til's apologetic has taken some giant steps toward reforming our Christian epistemology and theological method. These developments, however, have not profoundly affected the contemporary teaching of systematic theology or the preaching and popular theologizing of our day.

Therefore as part of a solution, following Calvin (but departing from much Reformed theology since his time), I have introduced a formal unit on the "knowledge of God" as part of my teaching in systematic theology. The idea came to me ten years ago, when Westminster Seminary determined to combine its first-semester theology course (which includes units on Introduction to Theology, The Word of God, and Revelation, Inspiration and Inerrancy) with its first-semester apologetics course. Both courses were deeply concerned with epistemology. In the theology course, we asked about the nature of theology and about theological method and structure, as well as about God's self-communication to us in nature, Word, and Spirit. In the apologetics course, we dealt with the unbeliever's knowledge of God, its differences from the believer's knowledge, and the means by which God replaces the former with the latter. Therefore it seemed pedagogically sound to introduce a unit on epistemology into the combined theology-apologetics course, and it seemed an ideal means to reintroduce into our "system" much of the biblical teaching on the knowledge of God. And incidentally, it also seemed a useful method of presenting some fresh ideas on what it ought to mean in our day to be "Reformed," to be followers of Calvin. Those purposes, then, define what my class lectures and what this book intend to do.

But where should the epistemology unit be placed in the larger structure of the theology-apologetics course that includes the "Word of God" and various apologetic topics? Generally, questions of theological encyclopedia (i.e., Where in our system do we discuss x—before what and after what?) bore me; they are not nearly as important as some people make them out to be. Most often, they are questions about pedagogy much more than they are questions of theological substance; the answers depend as much on the nature of a particular audience or situation as on the nature of the biblical truth itself. There is no *one point* in the theological system at which epistemology must be discussed. My decision to discuss epistemology after the introductory unit on the Word of God, however, is based on the following lines of thought.

1. SCM Press, 1964.

One could argue that the doctrine of the knowledge of God ought to be a student's first introduction to systematic theology. After all, it seems that one must know what knowing is before one goes about the business of knowing specific things. One must know what theology is before one can do theology. Right? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, there is certainly much virtue in the idea of discussing epistemology toward the beginning of a student's theological course of study, since it does provide him with concepts and methods that will enrich the rest of his study. On the other hand, the lack of philosophical, linguistic, and catechetical background of many seminary students makes me wonder if first-year students are ready to tackle an area of study as difficult as this can be. And more seriously, there is a sense in which students are not ready to define "theology" until they have done it, just as they are not ready to define "knowledge" until they have done some knowing. Contrary to our intellectualist prejudices, the practice of something generally precedes its definition. (People were writing poetry and thinking logically long before Aristotle defined poetry and formulated a logic.) Can you do theology without knowing what theology is? Of course, just as you can tell time without having a definition of "time," just as you can walk or eat or breathe without being able to give precise definitions of those activities. And sometimes we *must* do something before we can define it. It is scarcely conceivable that anyone could define "seeing" without ever having seen anything. And if a blind man were able, through reading in braille dictionaries, to define sight, imagine how much deeper his understanding of it would be after his sight were restored. A student is not ready, in my view, to appreciate definitions of "theology" or of the "knowledge of God" unless he has already done some theology and unless he already knows God!

Thus I place this unit second—after the unit on the Word of God. That satisfies the legitimate desire to have it toward the beginning of the curriculum (though it does not solve the problem of the inadequate background of many students), and it does give the students some experience in doing theology before they learn, in a formal sense, what theology is. Furthermore, this procedure has the advantage of supporting a major theme of our study: the knowledge of God is a human response to God's Word and is justified by its conformity thereunto. Word of God, then knowledge of God; that is the order both in experience and in our curriculum.

Within the class unit and within this book, the structure looks like this: Part One: The Objects of Knowledge (What do we know?); Part Two: The Justification of Knowledge (On what basis do we know?); Part Three: The Methods of Knowledge (How do we know?). These questions are not

independent. To answer one, you must have some answers in the other areas, too. For example, if you are going to define the objects of knowledge (Part One), you cannot do so unless you do it on the right basis (Part Two), using a proper method (Part Three). In theology, as in other disciplines, it very often happens that questions are interdependent in this way. This does not mean, however, that we must know all the answers before we can know any. God has revealed His truth clearly, and all of us have some knowledge in each area on which we can build. We will begin with the first question, use it to help us answer the second, then find that the second question gives us a fuller understanding of the first one, and so forth. The interdependence of the questions will thus help our study, not hinder it.

One last introductory comment: the material in this book is not intended to do all the work of a philosophical epistemology. Of course, there will be some overlap between this book and works on the theory of knowledge, but I do not intend to go into detail on topics such as the relations between sense data, a priori concepts, sensation, perception, abstraction, and so forth. Studies of such topics have their place (which is *not* to serve as our ultimate source of epistemological certainty), and they can be valuable, especially when developed on Christian assumptions. But our purposes are different.

Part One

THE OBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE

What is the "object" of the knowledge of God? In knowing God, what do we know? Well, *God*, of course! So what remains to be said? Much.

In the first place, it is important that we be clear on what kind of God we are seeking to know. There are many different kinds of knowledge, and differences in the justification and methods of knowledge are often based on differences in the objects that we know. We come to know our friends in different ways from the ways that we come to know the Middle Ages; knowing the population of San Diego is different from knowing Bach's Brandenburg Concerti. Our criteria, methods, and goals in knowing will depend on what we seek to know. Knowing God is something utterly unique, since God himself is unique. Though many beings are called gods by men, there is only one living and true God, and He is radically different from anything in creation. We are not seeking to know just any god; we are seeking to know the Lord Jehovah, the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we must spend a bit of time in the "doctrine of God," even though, as I indicated in the preface, in my teaching and writing that topic follows the doctrine of the knowledge of God, the topic of this book.

In the second place, we do not come to know God, or anything else, in a vacuum. In knowing God, we come to know His relations to the world and to many things in the world, especially to ourselves. We cannot know God without understanding some of those relations: the biblical God is the God of the covenant, the Creator and sustainer of the world, the Redeemer and judge of men. So we cannot know God without knowing other things at the same time, hence the plural *objects* in the title of this section. And, quite importantly, we cannot know other things rightly without knowing God rightly. Thus theistic epistemology, the doctrine of the knowledge of God, implies a general epistemology, a doctrine of the knowledge of everything. And so in this section we will have to discuss, at least in a limited way, all the "objects" of human knowledge.

A word to some of you who have studied epistemology before: by beginning this book with a discussion of the "objects" of knowledge, I am not intending to erect some great wall of separation between "subject" and "object." To do so would be to destroy all knowledge and would be entirely contrary to Scripture. You will see that I am in greater danger of relating subject and object too closely than I am of illegitimately "dichotomizing" them. Still, one has to start somewhere; he cannot relate everything to everything else all at once, for otherwise he would be God. Thus I start with the "object" of knowledge, and in time we shall see how intimately that object is bound up with the knowing subject. If someone argues that even to distinguish these is to presuppose some illegitimate separation, I reply that that is nonsense. One may make a distinction without separating at all in any meaningful sense, for example, between morning star and evening star, between California and the Golden State.

In this section I shall discuss (1) God, the Covenant Lord, (2) God and the World, and (3) God and Our Studies. In those three chapters we will discuss God, His law, creation, man as God's image, and the "objects" of knowledge in theology, philosophy, science, and apologetics. In each of these disciplines we will ask what it is that we seek to know.

Chapter 1

GOD, THE COVENANT LORD

Who is this God that we seek to know? Scripture describes Him in many ways, and it is dangerous to seize on any of them as being more basic or more important than others. In seeking to summarize Scripture's teachings, however, we can certainly do worse than to use the concept of divine "lordship" as our point of departure. "Lord" (*Yahweh* in Hebrew) is the name by which God identified himself at the beginning of His covenant with Israel (Exod. 3:13–15; 6:1–8; 20:1f.). It is the name (*kurios* in Greek) that has been given to Jesus Christ as head of the New Covenant, as head of His redeemed body (John 8:58; Acts 2:36; Rom. 14:9). The fundamental confessions of faith of both testaments confess God—Christ—as Lord (Deut. 6:4ff.; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). God performs His mighty acts "that you may know that I am the Lord" (cf. Exod. 7:5; 14:4, 18; the references in the Introduction; and Pss. 83:18; 91:14; Isa. 43:3; 52:6; Jer. 16:21; 33:2; Amos 5:8). At critical points in redemptive history, God announces "I am the Lord, I am he" (Isa. 41:4; 43:10–13, 25; 44:6; 48:12; cf. 26:4–8; 46:3f.; Deut. 32:39f., 43; Ps. 135:13; Hos. 12:4–9; 13:4ff.; Mal. 3:6, which allude to Exod. 3:13–15). In such passages, not only "Lord" but also the emphasis on the verb "to be" recall the name-revelation of Exodus 3:14. Jesus also frequently alludes to the "I am" in presenting His own character and office (John 4:26; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5ff.; cf. 6:48; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 14; 11:25; 12:46; 14:6; 15:1, 5). One of the most remarkable testimonies to Jesus' deity is the way in which He and His disciples identified Him with *Yahweh* of Exodus 3—a name so closely associated with God that at one point the Jews became afraid even to pronounce it. To summarize those points: throughout redemptive history,

God seeks to identify himself to men as Lord and to teach and demonstrate to them the meaning of that concept. "God is Lord"—that is the message of the Old Testament; "Jesus Christ is Lord"—that is the message of the New.

The Biblical Concept of Lordship

What is divine lordship? Little can be learned from the etymologies of *Yahweh, adonai*, or *kurios*. For one thing, those etymologies are uncertain (especially that of *Yahweh*), and furthermore, etymology is not always a reliable guide to meaning. The English *nice*, for example, comes from the Latin *nescius*, which means ignorant; the meanings of the two words are very different! Meanings of words are discovered through an investigation of their use, and such investigation does prove fruitful in the study of the lordship vocabulary in Scripture. My own study can be summarized as follows.

Lordship and Covenant

First of all, lordship is a covenantal concept. "Lord" is the name God gives to himself as head of the Mosaic Covenant and the name given to Jesus Christ as head of the New Covenant (on this, see the passages cited earlier). We may, therefore, define divine lordship as covenant headship.

Covenant may refer to a contract or agreement among equals or to a type of relation between a lord and his servants. Divine-human covenants in Scripture, of course, are of the latter type. In the most prominent ones, God as covenant Lord selects a certain people from among all the nations of the earth to be His own. He rules over them by His law, in terms of which all who obey are blessed and all who disobey are cursed. Yet the covenant is not merely law; it is also grace. It was God's grace, or unmerited favor, by which the covenant people were chosen. And since all men are sinners, it is only by God's grace that there will be any covenant blessing. Even the reprobate—those who do not receive blessing—are vessels of grace, means that God uses to fulfill His gracious purposes (Rom. 9:22–23).

In a broad sense, all of God's dealings with creation are covenantal in character. Meredith Kline[1] and others have observed that the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 is parallel in important respects to other narratives that describe the establishment of covenants. During the creation week, all things, plants, animals, and persons are appointed to be covenant servants, to obey God's law, and to be instruments (positively or negatively) of His gracious

1. See Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Baker Book House, 1980).

purpose. Thus everything and everybody is in covenant with God (cf. Isa. 24:5: all the "inhabitants of the earth" have broken the "everlasting covenant"). The Creator-creature relation is a covenant relation, a Lord-servant relation. When the Lord singled out Israel as His special people to be Lord over them in a peculiar way, He was not giving them an absolutely unique status; rather, He was calling them essentially into the status that all men occupy yet fail to acknowledge. Israel, to be sure, was given certain unique privileges (the land of Palestine, the institutions of sacrifice, prophet, priest, king, etc.), and God used Israel in a unique way to bring redemption (Christ) to the world. Thus Israel had certain unique responsibilities, portraying to the world through its diet, clothing, calendar, and so forth, the nature of the redemption to come. But essentially, Israel was simply a servant of God, like everyone else. This is only to say that God is Lord of all, that in all His relations with the world He speaks and acts as Lord.

Transcendence and Immanence

If God is covenant *head*, then He is exalted above His people; He is transcendent. If He is *covenant* head, then He is deeply involved with them; He is immanent. Note how beautifully these two concepts fit together when understood biblically.

Historically, terrible problems have developed with concepts of transcendence and immanence. The transcendence of God (His exaltation, His mysteriousness) has been understood as God's being infinitely removed from the creation, being so far from us, so different from us, so "wholly other" and "wholly hidden" that we can have no knowledge of Him and can make no true statements about Him. Such a god, therefore, has not revealed—and perhaps cannot reveal—himself to us. He is locked out of human life, so that for practical purposes we become our own gods. God says nothing to us, and we have no responsibilities to Him.

Similarly, the concept of immanence has been distorted in non-Christian thought, even in some would-be Christian theologies. Immanence has been understood to mean that God is virtually indistinguishable from the world, that when God enters the world He becomes so "worldly" that He cannot be found. The "Christian atheists" used to say that God abandoned His divinity and no longer exists as God. Less "radical" thinkers, like Barth and Bultmann, argued that though God still exists, His activity cannot be identified in space and time, that it affects all times and places equally and none in particular. Thus, in effect, there is no revelation; we have no responsibility before God.

Those false concepts of transcendence and immanence fit together in a peculiar way: both satisfy sinful man's desire to escape God's revelation, to avoid our responsibilities, to excuse our disobedience. Yet at bottom they are inconsistent with one another. How can God be infinitely far removed from us and wholly identical to us at the same time? Furthermore, neither of those concepts is even coherent. If God is "wholly other," then how can we know or say that He is "wholly other"? What right do we have to do theology at all if that is the case? And if God is indistinguishable from the world, why should the theologian even bother to speak of God? Why not simply speak of the world? Is it faith that validates such talk? Faith based on what? Can such faith be more than an irrational leap in the dark?

But if transcendence is covenant headship, and if immanence is God's covenant involvement with His people, then we are on solid ground. We are using concepts taught in Scripture, not ones invented by unbelieving philosophers. We are contemplating relations that however mysterious they may be (and they are mysterious) are nevertheless closely analogous to interpersonal relations in everyday life (father-son, ruler-citizen, husband-wife).

The differences between biblical and nonbiblical thought on these questions may be clarified (for some!) by figure 1.

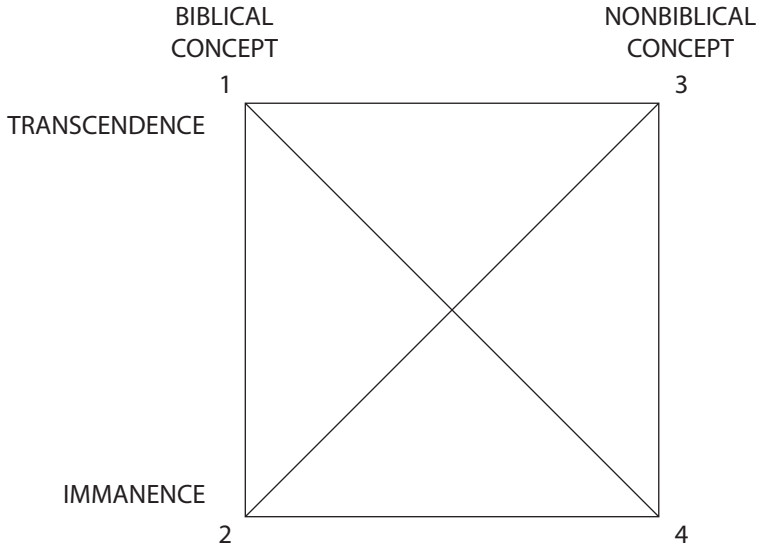

Fig. 1. The square of religious opposition.

The four corners represent four assertions:

1. God is head of the covenant.
2. God is involved as Lord with His creatures.
3. God is infinitely far removed from the creation.
4. God is identical to the creation.

Assertions *1* and *2* are biblical assertions, *3* and *4* are unbiblical. The first assertion represents a biblical view of divine transcendence, the second a biblical view of divine immanence. The third assertion represents a nonbiblical view of transcendence, the fourth a nonbiblical view of immanence. So the two sides distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian approach to the questions of God's immanence and transcendence. The upper half of the square deals with the concept of transcendence, the lower half with immanence. The diagonal lines indicate direct contradictions, showing precisely how the two positions differ: *1* asserts that God is distinct from creation as Lord, *4* denies any distinction at all; *2* asserts a meaningful involvement, *3* denies it. The horizontal lines indicate linguistic similarity: both *1* and *3* can be expressed as views of "transcendence," "exaltation," "mystery," and so forth; both *2* and *4* can be described as forms of "involvement," "immanence," and so forth. Thus there is plenty of room for misunderstanding. Although the two views are diametrically opposed, they can be confused with one another. Even biblical passages can be used in confusing ways. Passages on God's greatness, exaltation, incomprehensibility, and so forth can be applied either to *1* or *3*, passages on the divine nearness to either *2* or *4*. This shows why *3* and *4*, which are essentially non-Christian philosophical speculations, have gained some acceptance among theologians and churches. We must labor mightily to clarify these differences and to attack ambiguity if we are to speak clearly into the modern theological climate.

Vertical lines 1–2 and 3–4 represent the internal structure of each system. As we have seen, 3–4 is inconsistent at a basic level, though 1–2 presents a meaningful, coherent analogy with ordinary experience as interpreted by Scripture.

Control, Authority, Presence

Let us explore a bit further the concepts of transcendence (covenant headship) and immanence (covenant involvement). Divine transcendence in Scripture seems to center on the concepts of control and authority. Control is evident in that the covenant is brought about by God's sovereign power.

God brings His covenant servants into existence (Isa. 41:4; 43:10–13; 44:6; 48:12f.) and exercises total control over them (Exod. 3:8, 14).[2] As Lord, He sovereignly delivers them (Exod. 20:2) from bondage and directs the whole natural environment (cf. the plagues in Egypt) to accomplish His purposes for them. Authority is God's right to be obeyed, and since God has both control and authority, He embodies both might and right. Over and over, the covenant Lord stresses how His servants must obey His commands (Exod. 3:13–18; 20:2; Lev. 18:2–5, 30; 19:37; Deut. 6:4–9). To say that God's authority is absolute means that His commands may not be questioned (Job 40:11ff.; Rom. 4:18–20; 9:20; Heb. 11:4, 7, 8, 17, passim), that divine authority transcends all other loyalties (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 6:4f.; Matt. 8:19–22; 10:34–38; Phil. 3:8), and that this authority extends to all areas of human life (Exod.; Lev.; Num.; Deut.; Rom. 14:32; 1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 3:17, 23). Control and authority—these are the concepts that come to the fore when the Lord is presented to us as exalted above creation, and they are as far removed as possible from any notion of God as "wholly other" or as "infinitely distant."

God's immanence may be further described as "covenant solidarity." God elects His covenant people and identifies their goals with His. The heart of the relation is expressed by the words "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12; cf. Exod. 29:45; 2 Sam. 7:14; Rev. 21:27). He names himself as their God—"God of Israel"—thus identifying himself with them. To despise Israel is to despise God, and vice versa. In that way, God is "with them" (Exod. 3:12), near them (Deut. 4:7; cf. 30:14), Immanuel (cf. Gen. 26:3; 28:15; 31:3; 46:4; Exod. 3:12; 33:14; Deut. 31:6, 8, 23; Judg. 6:16; Jer. 31:33; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 28:20; John 17:25; 1 Cor. 3:16ff.; Rev. 21:22). Therefore we will sometimes describe God's "covenant solidarity" as a "presence" or "nearness," and this nearness, like God's exaltation, is a defining characteristic of God's lordship (Exod. 3:7–14; 6:1–8; 20:5, 7, 12; Ps. 135:13f.; Isa. 26:4–8; Hos. 12:4–9; 13:4ff.; Mal. 3:6; John 8:31–59; cf. Lev. 10:3; Ps. 148:14; Jonah 2:7; Rom. 10:6–8; Eph. 2:17; Col. 1:27). To emphasize the spiritual nearness between himself and Israel, God draws near to them in a spatial sense: on Mount Sinai, in the cloud and pillar in the wilderness, in the land of promise, in the tabernacle and temple. And He draws near in time, as well; He is "now" as well as "here." When the people are tempted to think of the covenant as an artifact of the distant past, God reminds them that

2. Cf. Exod. 33:18; 34:6; and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1959), 129–34.

He is the same today as He was yesterday. He is the God of the present and future, as much as He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He is the God who is ready now to deliver (cf. Exod. 3:15; 6:8; Isa. 41:4, 10, 13; Deut. 32:7, 39f., 43; Ps. 135:13; Isa. 26:4–8; Hos. 12:4–9; 13:4ff.; Mal. 3:6; John 8:52–58). Thus God's lordship is a deeply personal and practical concept. God is not a vague abstract principle or force but a living person who fellowships with His people. He is the living and true God, as opposed to all the deaf and dumb idols of this world. Knowledge of Him, therefore, is also a person-to-person knowledge. God's presence is not something that we discover through refined theoretical intelligence. Rather, God is unavoidably close to His creation. We are involved with Him all the time.

As controller and authority, God is "absolute," that is, His power and wisdom are beyond any possibility of successful challenge. Thus God is eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and so on. But this metaphysical absoluteness does not (as in non-Christian thought) force God into the role of an abstract principle. The non-Christian, of course, can accept an absolute only if that absolute is impersonal and therefore makes no demands and has no power to bless or curse. There are personal gods in paganism, but none of them is absolute; there are absolutes in paganism, but none is personal. Only in Christianity (and in other religions influenced by the Bible) is there such a concept as a "personal absolute."

Control, authority, personal presence—remember that triad. It will appear often in this book, for I know of no better way to summarize the biblical concept of divine lordship. And since lordship itself is so central, we will be running into this triad again and again. I will refer to those three ideas collectively as the "lordship attributes" of God. Remember, too, the concept of God as transcendent and immanent and as personal absolute (i.e., absolute personality). We will find these categories very useful in summarizing the Christian world view and in contrasting it with the non-Christian one.

It is also important that we see the three lordship attributes as forming a unit, not as separate from one another. God is "simple" in the theological sense (not compounded of parts), so there is a sense in which if you have one attribute you have them all. All of God's attributes involve one another, and that is definitely the case with the lordship triad. God's control, according to Scripture, involves authority, for God controls even the structure of truth and rightness. Control involves presence, for God's power is so pervasive that it brings us face to face with Him in every experience. Authority involves control, for God's commands presuppose His full ability to enforce them. Authority involves presence, for God's commands are clearly revealed and

are the means by which God acts in our midst to bless and curse. Presence involves control, lest anything in heaven or earth should keep us from God or Him from us (John 10; Rom. 8). Presence involves authority, for God is never present apart from His Word (cf. Deut. 30:11ff.; John 1:1ff.; etc.; and see my unpublished *Doctrine of the Word of God*).

To summarize, knowing God is knowing Him as Lord, "knowing that I am the Lord." And knowing Him as Lord is knowing His control, authority, and presence.

Lordship and Knowledge

How does the character of God as Lord affect the way in which we know Him? Let us consider several implications of the foregoing discussion.

Knowability and Incomprehensibility

Everyone Knows God

Because God is Lord, He is not only knowable but *known* to all (Rom. 1:21). The "agnostic" who says that he does not know if God exists is deceiving himself and may be seeking to deceive others. God's covenantal presence is with all His works, and therefore it is inescapable (Ps. 139). Furthermore, all things are under God's control, and all knowledge, as we will see, is a recognition of divine norms for truth; it is a recognition of God's authority. Therefore in knowing anything, we know God. Even those without the Scriptures have this knowledge: they know God, they know their obligations to Him (Rom. 1:32), and they know the wrath that is on them because of their disobedience (Rom. 1:18).

But in a more profound sense, only believers know God, only Christians have a knowledge of God that is the essence of eternal life (John 17:3; cf. Matt. 11:27; John 1:14; 1 Cor. 2:9–15; 13:12; 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Tim. 1:12, 14ff.; 1 John 5:20). When this knowledge is in view, it may be said by comparison that unbelievers are ignorant, that they do *not* know God (1 Cor. 1:21; 8:2; 15:34; Gal. 4:8; 1 Thess. 4:5; 2 Tim. 3:7; Titus 1:16; Heb. 3:10; 1 John 4:8).

Although non-Christians know God, they frequently try to deny that He is known or even knowable. They wish to avoid being confronted by the glory of God, by His demands, and by His judgment; they want no part of His love. Denial of God's knowability stems from a personal, moral situation; views about God—Christian and non-Christian alike—always arise from one's personal relation to God, from a person's ethical and religious orientation.

We can also understand the non-Christian's position by seeing how it is related to his views of transcendence and immanence, as we noted earlier. On the one hand, if God is so far away that He cannot be identified (i.e., transcendent), then of course He cannot be known. On the other hand, if God is so close to the world that He cannot be distinguished from it (i.e., immanent), then again we are ignorant of God. Or perhaps it might be said that since God is so immanent, so "near us," we can know Him perfectly well, with unaided human reason, perhaps (i.e., rationalism), or by some sort of mystical intuition. But the god that is known through such methods will not be the God of Scripture; he will be a god of man's own devising —subject to man's control, yielding to man's own methods of knowing, subject to man's criteria. Thus both the non-Christian transcendence and immanence standpoints deny the knowability of the biblical God. Metaphysics and epistemology are correlative; the nature of God determines His knowability. Once you deny the lordship of God, you will not be able to defend His knowability. Only if God is who Scripture says He is may we claim to know Him. And if He is Lord, then His control, authority, and presence in the world make Him unavoidably knowable, as we have seen.

When non-Christians argue that God is unknowable, they generally appeal to the limitations implicit in human knowledge. They claim, with Hume, that our knowledge is limited to sense perception or, with Kant, that we can only know "appearances" or "phenomena," not reality itself. Or, with more recent (but currently unfashionable) positivism, they argue that we know only what can be established by a certain kind of scientific method. Thus God either must be unknowable (the non-Christian transcendence standpoint), or He must fit within the realms of finite sense-perception—"phenomena" or science—and thus be less than the biblical God (the non-Christian immanence standpoint); or else we must bounce arbitrarily back and forth between these two positions (the approach of modern dialectical theology and philosophy).

It is certainly true that our knowledge is finite. The agnostic has recognized that in some measure, though he illegitimately uses it for his own purposes.[3] But the limitations of human knowledge are, we will see, very different from the kinds of limitations supposed by Hume, Kant, and the positivists. For now, however, we should simply remind ourselves who the Lord is. Because He *controls* all things, God enters His world—our world—without being relativized by it, without losing His divinity. Thus in knowing our world, we know God. Because God is the supreme *authority*, the author

3. We will discuss the limitations of our knowledge in the next section.

of all the criteria by which we make judgments or come to conclusions, we know Him more certainly than we know any other fact about the world. And because God is the supremely *present* one, He is inescapable. God is not shut out by the world; He is not rendered incapable of revealing himself because of the finitude of the human mind. On the contrary, all reality reveals God. The agnostic argument, then, presupposes a nonbiblical concept of God. If God is who Scripture says He is, there are no barriers to knowing Him.

Limitations on Our Knowledge of God

The fact that God is Lord also implies that our knowledge is not on a par with His. As the servant comes to know his Lord, he becomes more and more aware of how little he knows, of how much God transcends the reach of a servant's mind.

Our limitations are of several kinds. First (as we have mentioned), sin motivates fallen people to distort the truth, to flee from it, to exchange it for a lie, and to misuse it. This is one potent source of falsehood and ignorance in our thinking, even in the redeemed mind. Because of Christ, Christians have that problem under control (Rom. 6:14), but it will not completely disappear until the Last Day.

Second, errors in our knowledge arise from immaturity and weakness. Even if Adam had not fallen, the acquisition of knowledge would not have taken place all at once. It would have been a historical process, part of the "subduing of the earth" (Gen. 1:28; cf. 2:19f.). Even Jesus "grew" in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52) and "learned" obedience (Heb. 5:8) in His life as a perfect man. Certainly, then, even apart from sin, human knowledge may be incomplete; we may be ignorant in comparison to what we may know later. Thus I see no reason why even an unfallen race may not have proceeded by the method of trial and error in the continuing quest for knowledge. Error as such need not cause pain or wrongdoing; to make an honest mistake is not in itself sinful. Thus unfallen Adam might have been wrong about some things. And it is much more likely that *we* will make mistakes, because our weakness and immaturity are compounded with the sin of our hearts. Unfallen Adam could not have made a mistake about his present duty before God, but he might have made other kinds of mistakes, even about theological formulations.[4]

4. Is it sinful to hold the wrong view about limited atonement, for example? Holding a wrong view about this (or any doctrine) would be sinful only if (1) the person has the Bible in his own language, presented at a level suited to his mental capacity, (2) he has had the time and resources to come to a correct conclusion, and (3) he has nonetheless willfully

But those limitations are only the beginning. For even a perfect creaturely knowledge, that is, the knowledge of a sinless, mature creature who possesses as much information as a creature could possess, would be a limited knowledge. To be a creature is to be limited in thought and knowledge, as in all other aspects of life. We are limited by our Creator, our Lord. We have a beginning in time, but He does not. We are controlled by Him and subject to His authority; we are the objects of ultimate covenant blessing or cursing, and so the nature of our thought should reflect our status as servants. Our thinking should be "servant-thinking."

For those reasons, theologians have spoken of God's "incomprehensibility." Incomprehensibility is not inapprehensibility (i.e., unknowability), because incomprehensibility presupposes that God is known. To say that God is incomprehensible is to say that our knowledge is never equivalent to God's own knowledge, that we never know Him precisely as He knows himself.

In the 1940s there was a debate within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church about the concept of God's incomprehensibility. The major opponents were Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark.[5] Neither man was at his best in this discussion; each seriously misunderstood the other, as we will see. Both, however, had valid concerns. Van Til wished to preserve the Creator-creature distinction in the realm of knowledge, and Clark wished to prevent any skeptical deductions from the doctrine of incomprehensibility, to insist that we really do know God on the basis of revelation. Van Til, therefore, insisted that even when God and man were thinking of the same thing (a particular rose, for example), their thoughts about it were never *identical*—God's were the thoughts of the Creator, man's of the creature. Such language made Clark fear skepticism. It seemed to him that if there was some discrepancy between man's "This is a rose" and God's (concerning the same rose), then the human assertion must somehow fall short of the truth, since the very nature of truth is identity with God's mind. Thus if there is a necessary discrepancy between God's mind and man's at every point, it

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rejected the truth (at some level of his thinking). We should be gentle with those who differ from us; they may not be rebellious or sinful in their disagreement, only immature (in other respects they may surpass us). And, of course, we must always recognize the possibility that we may be wrong, that a brother or sister who disagrees may have something to teach us.

5. See the "Minutes of the Fifteenth General Assembly" (1948) of the OPC for a committee report on this question. Other minutes during that general period also refer to the controversy. Van Til presents his account in his (unpublished) *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 159–93. Fred Klooster analyzed the debate in *The Incomprehensibility of God in the Orthodox Presbyterian Conflict* (T. Wever, 1951), a helpful book but not sufficiently sensitive to the ambiguities of the language used in the debate.

would seem that man could know nothing truly; skepticism would result. Thus the discussion of incomprehensibility—essentially a doctrine about the relation of man's thoughts to God's being—turned in this debate more narrowly into a discussion of the relation between man's thoughts and God's thoughts. To say that God is incomprehensible came to mean that there is some discontinuity (much deeper in Van Til's view than in Clark's) between our thoughts of God (and hence of creation) and God's own thoughts of himself (and of creation).

My contribution to this discussion will be to offer the reader a list of discontinuities between God's thoughts and ours that I believe can be substantiated from Scripture, a list of continuities between the two that ought to be acknowledged, and a list of alleged relations between the two that seem to me to be stated ambiguously and that therefore are capable of being affirmed in one sense and denied in another.

Discontinuities. Scripture teaches the following discontinuities between God's thought and ours.

1. God's thoughts are uncreated and eternal; ours are created and limited by time.

2. God's thoughts ultimately determine, or decree, what comes to pass. God's thoughts cause the truths that they contemplate; ours do not. This is the lordship attribute of control in the realm of knowledge.

3. God's thoughts, therefore, are self-validating; they serve as their own criteria of truth. God's thoughts are true simply because they are His. None of us can claim to have such self-attesting thoughts. Our thoughts are not necessarily true, and when they are true, it is because they agree with the thoughts of someone else, namely God, who furnishes the criteria for our thinking. This is the lordship attribute of authority in the area of knowledge.

4. God's thoughts always bring glory and honor to Him because God is always "present in blessing" to himself. Because God is "simple," His thoughts are always self-expressions.[6] Our thoughts are blessed only by virtue of God's covenantal presence with us. This is the lordship attribute of presence as applied to knowledge. Note that in *1–4*, "incomprehensibility" is an aspect of God's lordship. All the divine attributes can be understood as manifestations of God's lordship, as applications of divine lordship to different areas of human life.

6. See my *Doctrine of the Word of God* (P&R Publishing, 2010). God's thinking and speech are divine attributes and therefore (by the doctrine of simplicity) are identical to God himself. They express, therefore, everything that God is.

5. God's thoughts are the originals of which ours, at best, are only copies, images. Our thoughts, therefore, would not exist apart from God's covenantal presence (see *4* above).

6. God does not need to have anything "revealed" to Him; He knows what He knows simply by virtue of who He is and what He does. He knows, then, at His own initiative. But all of our knowledge is based on revelation. When we know something, it is because God decided to let us know it, either by Scripture or by nature. Our knowledge, then, is initiated by another. Our knowledge is a result of grace. This is another manifestation of the lordship attribute of "control."[7]

7. God has not chosen to reveal all truth to us. For example, we do not know the future, beyond what Scripture teaches. We do not know all the facts about God or even about creation. In the OPC debate, the difference between God's knowledge and ours was called a "quantitative difference"—God knows more facts than we do.[8]

8. God possesses knowledge in a different way from us. He is immaterial and therefore does not gain knowledge from organs of sense perception. Nor does He carry on "processes of reasoning," understood as temporal sets of actions. Nor is God's knowledge limited by the fallibilities of memory or of foresight. Some have characterized His knowledge as an "eternal intuition," and however we may describe it, it clearly is something quite different from our methods of knowing. In the OPC debate, this discontinuity was called a difference in the "mode" of knowledge.[9]

9. What God does reveal to us, He reveals in a creaturely form. Revelation does not come to us in the form in which it exists in God's mind. Scripture,

7. Cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 165 (top).

8. Clark expressed this idea by saying that God (more precisely, God's essence) is incomprehensible except as God reveals truths concerning His nature. Van Til rightly replied that apart from revelation, God is not only incomprehensible but inapprehensible (i.e., unknowable; Van Til, *Introduction*, 168f.). The proper conclusion, then, would be to say that Clark failed to distinguish adequately between incomprehensibility and inapprehensibility or to say that he has an inadequate concept of incomprehensibility. Van Til, however, assumed that Clark was willing to make such a distinction. He understood Clark to say that God is incomprehensible but not inapprehensible apart from revelation, and thus he charged Clark with holding that God is knowable apart from revelation. But I find no evidence that warrants such an interpretation of Clark. Van Til's argument here is ingenious, but it is a misunderstanding of Clark's position.

9. Clark affirmed the difference in mode, as well as the "quantitative difference" between God's knowledge and ours (see 7 above). Van Til, however, replied "that if one does not know anything of God's mode of knowing then one can know nothing of God's being" (Van Til, *Introduction*, 170). This, too, seems to reflect a misunderstanding of Clark, who according to Van Til's own account said that the mode is different, not that the mode is unknowable.

for example, is in human, not divine, language. It is "accommodated," that is, adapted in some measure to our ability to understand, though it is not exhaustively understandable to us even in that accommodated form.[10]

10. God's thoughts, when taken together, constitute a perfect wisdom; they are not chaotic but agree with one another. His decrees constitute a wise plan. God's thoughts are coherent; divine thinking agrees with divine logic. That is not always true of our thoughts, and we have no reason to suppose that even as we deal with revelation we may not run into truth that our logic cannot systematize, that it cannot relate coherently with other truth. Therefore we may find in revelation what Van Til calls "apparent contradictions."[11]

11. Discontinuity *7* is affected by the progress of revelation: the more God reveals, the more facts we know, though we never reach the point where we know as many facts as God. The other discontinuities, however, are not at all affected by revelation. No matter how much of himself God reveals, there always remains an "essential disproportion between the infinite fullness of the being and knowledge of God and the capacity and intelligence of the finite creature."[12] Thus even what God has revealed is in important senses beyond our comprehension (cf. Judg. 13:18; Neh. 9:5; Pss. 139:6; 147:5; Isa. 9:6; 55:8f.). According to these passages, there is not merely a realm of the unknown beyond our competence, but what is within our competence, what we know, leads us to worship in awe. The hymn of wonder in Romans 11:33–36 expresses amazement not at what is unrevealed but precisely at what is revealed, at what has been described in great detail by the apostle. The more we know, the more our sense of wonder ought to increase, because increased knowledge brings us into greater contact with the incomprehensibility of God.[13] It was this "essential disproportion" between Creator and creature

10. Cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 165.

11. I will say more on these later, when we take up the subject of logic. My pamphlet *Van Til the Theologian* (Pilgrim Publishing, 1976) attempts to give an analysis of this subject.

12. For this formulation and others in this section I am indebted to my colleague Norman Shepherd's lectures on the doctrine of God. For the uses made of this indebtedness, I take full responsibility.

13. There are (at least) two passages in Scripture that seem to suggest that the difference between divine and human knowledge is temporary, a difference to be remedied by further revelation. In Matthew 11:25–27 Jesus says that it is the prerogative of the Son to reveal the knowledge that He has in distinction from all creatures, and in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (cf. 2:6–17) Paul says that in the consummation we will know "even as" God has known us. Here we should note that there certainly is one sense in which revelation diminishes the distance between our knowledge and God's (see 7 above) and that Scripture often speaks in broad, general terms, without making distinctions that may be found elsewhere on its pages. Note Hodge's comment on 1 Corinthians 13:12: "As we are required to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect, Matt. 5:48, so we may be said to know even as we are known. We may

that sometimes in the OPC controversy was described as a "qualitative difference" between divine and human knowledge, as distinguished from the "quantitative difference" described above in *7*.

12. And doubtless, there is much more; we cannot exhaustively describe the differences between God's mind and ours—if we could, we would be divine. Thus we must add an "et cetera" to the eleven differences that we have already enumerated. This "et cetera" seems to have been another part of what was meant in the OPC controversy by the phrase "qualitative difference." At one point in that controversy, the Clark party challenged the Van Til party to "state clearly" what the qualitative difference was between God's thoughts and man's. The Van Til group replied that to accept that challenge would be to retract their whole position; if we could "state clearly" this qualitative difference, the difference would no longer exist. Again, I think, there was some mutual misunderstanding. At one level, it is possible (and necessary) to state clearly the nature of the difference. The difference is the difference between Creator and creature in the world of thought; it is a difference between divine thinking and human thinking, between the thoughts of the ultimate Lord and the thoughts of His servants. The implications of this basic difference can also be spelled out to some extent, as I have sought to do above. Insofar as they were asking for that kind of information, the demand of the Clark group was legitimate. But we must remember that the concept of incomprehensibility is self-referential, that is, if God is incomprehensible, then even His incomprehensibility is incomprehensible. We can no more give an exhaustive explanation of God's incomprehensibility than we can give of God's eternity, infinity, righteousness, or love.

Continuities. Scripture teaches the following continuities (the ways that divine and human thought are alike) between God's thought and ours. Failure to consider this side of the truth will lead us into skepticism. If knowledge of any sort is to be possible, there must be some sense(s) in which man's thought can "agree" with God's, in which we can think God's thoughts after Him.

1. Divine and human thought are bound to the same standard of truth. As Van Til puts it, "The Reformed faith teaches that the reference point for any proposition is the same for God and for man."[14] I prefer the term

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be perfect in our narrow sphere, as God is perfect in His; and yet the distance between Him and us remains infinite. What Paul wishes to impress upon the Corinthians is that the gifts in which they so much prided themselves were small matters compared to what is in reserve for the people of God."

14. Van Til, *Introduction*, 171; cf. 165.

"standard" to the more ambiguous "reference point." God's thoughts are self-validating; man's are validated by God's. Thus they are both validated by reference to the same standard, divine thought. Man's thoughts are true insofar as they conform to God's norms for human thinking. "For human thinking," of course, reminds us of those discontinuities we discussed earlier. And it must also be emphasized that our thought is subject to the norm, not identical with it, as is God's. Yet both divine and human thinking must accord with norms, and in both cases those norms are divine.

2. Divine and human thought may be about the same things, or as philosophers say, they may have the same "objects." When a man thinks about a particular rose and when God thinks about it (He is always thinking about it, of course, since He is always—eternally—omniscient), they are thinking about the same thing. Sometimes those objects are "propositions," assertions of fact. Van Til says, "That two times two are [sic] four is a well known fact. God knows it. Man knows it."[15] Paul believed Christ was risen; God believes the same thing. Now of course we must keep our discontinuities in mind. God's belief in the resurrection is the belief of the Creator, the Lord. It is not the same as Paul's belief, therefore, in *every* respect. But it has the same *object*; it affirms the same truth. To deny this is to render impossible any talk of "agreement" between God and man. If God and man cannot think about the same things, how can they agree about them? Furthermore, denying this leads to manifest absurdity. For example, if I believe in the resurrection, then God must not believe in it.[16]

3. It is possible for man's beliefs, as well as God's, to be true. A true belief is a belief that will not mislead. God's beliefs do not mislead Him, and true human beliefs do not mislead human beings. But there is a difference: a belief adequate to direct or lead a human life will not be adequate for God. God's life, however, is sufficiently like its image, human life, so that both God's beliefs and man's may be meaningfully described as true. A proposition that is true for humans plays a role in human life similar to the roles

15. Van Til, 172.

16. The reader may well ask why I am belaboring such an obvious point. The reason is that some disciples of Van Til have been so zealous for divine incomprehensibility that they have gone far beyond Van Til himself, overstating their point to dangerous and preposterous lengths. Jim Halsey, for example, in his article "A Preliminary Critique of 'Van Til: the Theologian,'" *WTJ* 39 (1976): 129, takes issue with my statement that God and man can have the same beliefs and think about the same things. Does he really mean to imply that God disbelieves in the resurrection? It is hard for me to believe that any Reformed writer could hold such a nonsensical position. Either I have misunderstood him or he has expressed himself most unclearly. More on Halsey at a later point.

that propositions that are true for God play in His life. If there is no truth, or if man's truth is "wholly different," wholly disanalogous, from God's, then knowledge is impossible.

4. Just as God is omniscient, so man's knowledge in a certain sense is universal. Van Til says, "Man knows something about everything."[17] Because we know God, we know that everything in the universe is created, subject to His authority, and filled with His presence. Because all things are known to God, He can reveal knowledge to us about anything. Therefore all things are potentially knowable, though nothing can be known by us precisely as God knows it.

5. God knows all things by knowing himself, that is, He knows what He knows by knowing His own nature and plan. As we said earlier (discontinuity *6*, above), God does not need to have anything "revealed" from outside of himself. Our thinking, as we noted, is very different in this respect, yet in a certain sense it is also similar. We, too, gain our knowledge by knowing ourselves—by knowing our own sensations, thoughts, actions, and so forth. Everything "from outside" must enter our minds if we are to know it. In a sense, then, all knowledge is self-knowledge. Unlike God's, our knowledge does not originate from within, though its inward character bears a significant resemblance to the inwardness of God's knowledge.

6. God's knowledge is self-validating, self-attesting, as we have seen (discontinuity *4*, above); ours is not. Because we are God's image, however, there is some reflection in us of God's self-attestation. Because everything we know must enter our consciousness (see *5*, above), even the norms by which we think must be adopted by us if we are to use them. We think on the basis of norms that we have chosen but that does not make us autonomous. The norms originate in God and proclaim His ultimate authority (not ours), and we are obligated *to choose* the ones that are truly authoritative. Thus the norms that we obey on any occasion will be the ones that we have chosen.

7. God's thoughts are ultimate creators. They cause the truths that they contemplate, but ours do not (discontinuity *2*, above). Nevertheless, our thoughts are also creative in a sense. We are secondary creators. On the one hand, when we refuse to think according to God's norms, we are at the same time refusing to live in His world and devising a world of our own to replace it. On the other hand, when we think obediently, we are recreating for ourselves what God has created for us. As Romans 1 teaches, fallen man exchanges the truth for a lie. Adopting a lie affects not only the contents

17. Van Til, *Introduction*, 164; cf. 166.

of our heads but every area of our lives. Fallen man lives as if this were not God's world; he lives as if the world were his own ultimate creation. And having abandoned the criteria furnished by revelation, the only criteria by which he can distinguish truth and falsehood, he has no way of correcting his mistake. On the basis of his false criteria, his false world seems to be the real world, the only world that there is. Thus in an important sense, the sinner is a "secondary creator," one who chooses to live in a world—a dream world—that he has invented. The believer, too, is a secondary creator, one who adopts God's world as his own (see *6*, above).

Why speak of "creation" here? Why not merely say that men "interpret" the data of creation in different ways? Certainly it is true that this activity can be characterized as "interpretation." But if we leave the matter there, we may falsely suggest that believer and unbeliever are merely organizing or analyzing data that in themselves are neutral, that their analyses or interpretations can be compared with data that in themselves are uninterpreted and capable of being understood either way. That supposition, however, is false. The facts of creation are not raw data or brute facts that are subject to mutually contrary interpretations. They are preinterpreted by God. As Van Til says, "God's interpretation logically precedes . . . all facts."[18] Therefore human interpretation is never merely the interpretation of facts; it is always also a reinterpretation of God's interpretation. To deny God's interpretation is not merely to adopt an alternative but equally valid interpretation; it is to reject the facts as they truly are; it is to reject reality. There is no such thing as "brute fact" by which fallen man can seek to validate his interpretation over against God's. Fallen man can only reject the facts and seek to live in a world of his own making. Similarly, the believer, in working out a faithful interpretation of the facts, is not merely "interpreting" data but is affirming creation as it really is; he is accepting creation as the world that God made, and he is accepting the responsibility to live in that world as it really is. Thomas Kuhn, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962), argues that when there are no "brute facts" to adjudicate rival understandings, the activity of interpretation is much like that of creation. Although I reject Kuhn's relativism (as a nontheist, he assumes that we have no criterion beyond our systems to regulate facts), the concept of "re-creation" that is implicit in his view does not seem too strong.

Talk about "secondary creation" and "secondary self-attestation" (see *6*, above) might be frightening to those who do not have a Reformed

18. Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences* (unpublished syllabus), 51.

understanding of what the Bible teaches. To make human beings creators or attesters in any sense might seem to detract from the ultimate causality and authority of God. We must not forget, however, that not only is the Lord authoritative and in control but He is also covenantally present. Because He perfectly controls our interpretative work, all of our thinking is a revelation of Him and a manifestation of His presence. Thus we do not need to fear that the work of the human mind necessarily competes with the authority of God, because the Lord reveals himself in and through our thinking. Human freedom, then, need not block out God's revelation. Thus we need not fear thinking and knowing. And so a Reformed, or Calvinistic—not an Arminian—understanding of what the Bible teaches champions the true freedom of human thought. If true, the Arminian's boast that he is able to think autonomously ("freely") would imply only that human thought is in bondage to the random forces of chance, when in reality (according to a Reformed understanding of the Bible) that is not the case. When we think in obedience to God's Word, we know that our very thinking processes will reveal God to us. Our minds image God, even in His sovereign attributes of control and authority.

Problem areas. But there are some problem areas. We have seen that God's thoughts are unlike ours in certain respects and like ours in others. I have, however, purposely avoided the use of certain language commonly used in discussing these issues. Those familiar with these discussions will wonder why I have not commented, for example, on the questions of whether we can know "God in himself." Well, my position is that this and other expressions are ambiguous and therefore certain assertions containing them ought to be affirmed in one or more senses and denied in others.

Let us now examine some of these problem areas.

1. Do we have an "adequate" idea of God? Van Til[19] and Bavinck[20] say No, but that notion seems irrational. Surely, we want to say, though God is incomprehensible, at least we have an "adequate" knowledge of Him, a knowledge that is sufficient for our needs. Well, the problem is a simple case of ambiguity. In classical theology, *adequatio* meant something much more than *adequate* generally means to us, something more like *comprehension*. Van Til and Bavinck are thinking more of the classical *adequatio* than of the contemporary use of *adequate*.

19. Van Til, *Introduction*, 183.
20. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1951), 33.

2. Do we know the "essence" of God? It has been common in theology to deny that we do. Thus Bavinck says, "Calvin deemed it vain speculation to attempt 'an examination of God's essence.' It is sufficient for us 'to become acquainted with His character and to know what is conformable to His nature.'"[21] Van Til, however, says that we know something about everything, including the essence of God, though we cannot comprehend it. Thus Van Til teaches that with regard to knowledge of God's "essence," we are basically in the same position that we are in with regard to all of our other knowledge of God. There is no special problem in knowing God's "essence." Now we must be careful here. In such situations of theological perplexity, we are often tempted to respond to the sounds of words, rather than to their meanings. To some it sounds rationalistic to claim knowledge of God's essence; to others it sounds irrationalistic to deny it. But a theologian must learn to analyze first and to react later. Actually the idea of "essence" is not entirely clear.

Essence, in general, is the quality or qualities by which something is defined, the quality or qualities that make something what it is. In theology we define justification as the imputation of Christ's righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. Many things are true about justification, but it seems that those two phrases somehow specify what justification "really" is, what its essence is. What is the difference between a defining quality (an "essential" quality) and a nonessential quality? That is a difficult question to answer, but (ignoring some of the problems) let me suggest four criteria for an "essential quality." (a) An essential quality is one that is in some sense real, not merely apparent—perhaps even what is "most real" about something. We seem to feel that when we get to the "essence" of anything, we are getting to what it "really" is. (b) An essential quality is one that is necessary to the being of the thing, so that the thing could not be what it is without that attribute. A triangle, for instance, cannot be a triangle without being three-sided. Three-sidedness is "necessary" to triangularity. "Having an area of three square feet" is not necessary in this sense. (c) An essential attribute is distinctive to the type of thing being defined. Triangles are three-sided, but no nontriangles are three-sided. (d) An essential quality must be important to our understanding of the thing defined; one might even argue that it should be the most basic quality for our understanding. Three-sidedness, we generally feel, is the "most basic" fact for our understanding of triangularity.

In the light of that discussion, do we know the "essence" of God? We certainly know a number of divine attributes, or qualities. God is a spirit,

21. Bavinck, 25.

infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, and so forth. Certainly these attributes are real (see *(a)*, above). Although there are differences between God's thoughts and ours, we dare not make those differences so great that they rob us of the reality of God. When we say that God is eternal, we are talking about how He really and truly is, not merely about how He appears to us. We are talking about Him in a human way but in a way that is true; God has certainly given us the power to speak truly about Him. Furthermore, at least some divine attributes, such as eternality, are necessary (see *(b)*, above). God would not be God if He were not eternal. Eternality is also distinctive of God (see *(c)*, above), for in an important sense God alone is eternal.[22] And surely, eternality is also important to our understanding of God (see *(d)*, above), though it is dangerous to make judgments about what attribute or attributes of God are "most" important.[23]

With respect to the most natural meaning of *essence*, then, Van Til is correct. We can know God's "essence" as much as we can know anything else about God (within the limitations we noted earlier); there is no reason to draw any limitations about "essence" that we have not already drawn about other knowledge of God. Perhaps the polemic against seeking to know God's "essence" is more broadly intended to discourage speculation (assertions not warranted by Scripture), specifically about the nature of God. Certainly, people do often speculate when they seek to answer questions about God's nature and attributes. And often the quest for God's "essence" becomes an attempt to weigh the importance of various attributes against one another—generally a wholly fruitless pursuit. Although it is proper to warn ourselves against such error, there are better ways to formulate that warning than by generally condemning inquiry about God's essence.

3. Do we know "God in himself" or only "God in relation to us?" Theolologians are often terribly adamant in denying that we know "God in himself." Unfortunately, they often fail to clarify the meaning of that rather ambiguous phrase. Even Bavinck, one of the greatest Reformed theologians, is

22. In another sense, we can have a life that Scripture calls "eternal," but that is different from the eternity that is distinctive of the Creator.

23. In one sense, all necessary attributes of God are equally important because they are all "coterminous with" one another; they represent the whole being of God as seen from different perspectives. In another sense, it is difficult to determine what is most important "for our understanding" of God. Subjective considerations that raise questions about the whole idea of "essence" certainly enter in here. Perhaps what is "essential" has as much to do with our subjective need as it has to do with "objective reality." Yet as we have seen, essence (see *(a)*, above) is often thought to be, among all possible predications of a subject, a paradigm of objectivity.

confusing on this matter. On page 32 of *The Doctrine of God* he says, "There is no knowledge of God as he is in himself," but on page 337 he announces, "Thus far we have dealt with God's being as it exists in itself," and on page 152 he tells us that God does not change, though His relations to creatures change—thus assuming that we have some knowledge of God's changeability apart from His relations to us.

Let us examine various things that might be meant by "knowledge of God in himself." (a) Knowing God without any admixture of human interpretation. Such knowledge, of course, is impossible to man, because all human knowledge involves human interpretation. (b) Knowing God in a "purely theoretical" way, without any reference to our practical needs or concerns. Later, I will argue that there is no such thing as "purely theoretical knowledge" in this sense. All knowledge is practical because it meets human needs. Certainly the knowledge of God in Scripture has this character. Thus there is no knowledge of "God in himself" in this illegitimate sense. Calvin seems to have this sort of point in mind in III, ii, 6 of the *Institutes*, though he has a less technical concept of "theoretical" than I presently have in view. (c) Knowing God without revelation. Clearly such knowledge does not exist for man. Calvin often has the concern of bringing all of our thinking into subjection to revelation. Note the context of I, x, 2. (d) Knowing God as He knows himself. As we have argued, this too is excluded. John Murray argues that when Calvin denies knowledge of God *apud se* ("in himself") he means that we do not know God as God knows himself. He distinguishes *apud se* from *in se*, which (he argues) would have a broader meaning. (e) Knowing God exhaustively. This, too, is excluded by our previous argumentation. (f) Knowing God's essence. See *2*, above. (g) Knowing facts about God (e.g., His eternality), which would be true even if He had not created the world. In that sense we can know "God in himself." We know these facts because Scripture reveals them. That is what Bavinck had in mind on page 337. (h) Knowing God as He really is. Yes! Although modern theologians have sometimes used Calvin's statement in I, x, 2 to encourage a denial of God's knowability, such a thought never crossed Calvin's mind. Scripture, at any rate, is clear: God is both knowable and known. He is known truly, known as He really is. Some people have argued that because our knowledge of God comes through revelation and then through our senses, reason, and imagination, it cannot be a knowledge of God as He really is but only of how He appears to us. It is certainly true that we know God as He appears to us, but must we therefore assume that these appearances are false, that they do not tell us the truth? We would

assume that only if we were to buy the Kantian presupposition that truth is always relativized when it enters our consciousness, that reality is forever hidden from us. But that is an unscriptural concept. In Scripture, reality (God in particular) is known, and our senses, reason, and imagination are not barriers to this knowledge; they do not necessarily distort it.[24] Rather, our senses, reason, and imagination are themselves revelations of God—means that God uses to drive His truth home to us. God is Lord; He will not be shut out of His world.

We should learn several lessons from this discussion. Ambiguities in theological terms are rampant. We should avoid emotional reactions to the sounds of theological expressions. We should try to unravel ambiguities in terminology and determine what expressions mean before we adopt or attack them. When an expression can have many meanings, such as "God in himself," we should carefully distinguish the meanings to determine in what senses we can accept it and in what senses we cannot.

4. Does a piece of human language have the same "meaning" for God that it has for man? For Clark, it was important to say, for example, that the statement "2 + 2 = 4" has the same meaning for God that it has for man. The alternative, he argued, was skepticism: "Thou shalt not kill" might mean to God "Thou shalt plant radishes," that is, divine-human communication would be impossible. His point is persuasive, but some clarifications are needed about the meaning of *meaning* (a topic that I will address later). The meaning of *meaning* has been the subject of much controversy in our century. I believe that *meaning* is best employed to designate that *use* of language that is authorized by God.[25] If we assume that view, then various theologically significant conclusions follow, as we will see later. One of those conclusions is that learning meaning is a matter of degree. Each piece of language has a multitude of uses, and we learn these by degrees—one by one, better and better. Knowing the meaning of a sentence like "2 + 2 = 4" is not something that occurs once-for-all in completed fashion, so that one either does or does not know the meaning. Rather, we learn more and more about the meaning (i.e., the uses) of "2 + 2 = 4" as we grasp more and more of its implications, its relations to other statements, its applications to technology, and so forth. God, of course, knows the meanings of all words, phrases, and statements exhaustively. He knows all of their uses, both actual and potential; He can

24. They do distort it when they are sinfully employed.

25. Of course God does not give us special revelations about the meanings of words (generally speaking), but He expects us to use our language properly, that is, truly, clearly, and lovingly by studying language in the context of His creation.

use our language better than any of us can. And of course, at a deeper level, we must say that God's knowledge of our language is different from our own knowledge of it because His is the knowledge of the Creator, the Lord of language (cf. the discontinuities discussed earlier).

Van Til's basic concern in the context of the incomprehensibility of God is with our understanding of Scripture. Can we say that we have "fully" understood a passage when we have exegeted it correctly? Van Til says No[26] for essentially the reasons that I noted above. God's knowledge, even of human language, is of a fundamentally different order from ours. Does that mean that Scripture is unclear or even unintelligible? If so, we would have to say that God failed in His attempt to communicate! No, Scripture is clear enough, so that we have no excuse for disobedience. We know the language well enough (note the emphasis on degree) to use Scripture as God intended. But because human language is so rich and because God's knowledge of it is so comprehensive, Scripture will always contain depths of meaning beyond our understanding. Are these depths of meaning irrelevant to us because they are beyond our understanding? No. Nothing is more important in Scripture than the sense of mystery that it conveys, the attitude of awe that it evokes from its readers.

Even for "2 + 2 = 4," we can say that God knows depths of meaning that we do not know, not to mention the other discontinuities implicit in the Creator-creature distinction. But God also surely knows the same limited levels of meaning that we know, and within that sphere He communicates with a clarity that leaves us without excuse.

5. Is all language about God figurative rather than literal? Question *4* dealt with God's use of human language; this one deals with our use of it. Here we are asking whether words must have different senses when applied to God than in other uses. We all know that Scripture uses figures of speech in referring to God—God's "hand," "eye," and so forth. Some have held the view that all human language about God is figurative. They argue that human language is an earthly language, a language that refers primarily to finite, temporal realities. If such language is to refer to God, it must be used in a way that is different from its natural use, that is, it must be used "figuratively" or "analogically."

But that is another problem that is too large for us to discuss in detail here. It has been one of the chief problems of the philosophy of religion, especially since the time of Thomas Aquinas. Many different kinds of analogies have

26. Van Til, *Introduction*, 18lff.

been distinguished from one another. Certain basic points, however, need to be taken into account.

(a) *Different referents, not different meanings*. It is certainly true that words have a significantly different *reference* when they are applied to God. Divine righteousness, for example, is significantly different from human righteousness. But the meaning of a term is not its referent.[27] *Chair* does not vary in meaning because it is used to refer to different chairs or to different kinds of chairs. If one is to show that *righteousness* has a figurative meaning when applied to God, then he will have to show not merely that God's righteousness is different from ours but also that the difference is of such a sort as to require a figurative use.

(b) *Distinction imprecise*. The differences between "literal" and "figurative" uses are imprecise. The "literal" use of a term is its "standard" or primary use. But it is not always possible to distinguish sharply between a "standard" and a nonstandard use.

(c) *Human language refers naturally to God*. A Christian epistemology will reject the premise that human language necessarily refers primarily to finite reality, because this premise is based on what we have called a non-Christian view of transcendence—that God is not clearly revealed in creation. On a Christian basis we must say that God made human language for His own purposes, the chief of which was to relate us to himself. Human language is (perhaps even chiefly, or "primarily") a medium by which we can talk to one another about God. Set free from that false premise, we can see all sorts of terms as having primary ("literal") reference to God, rather than to the creation. *God, righteousness, love*, and so forth are suitable candidates. Why should we not think of human righteousness as being modeled on God's, rather than the other way around? That is, in fact, the pattern indicated in Scripture. We should also note that all languages have religious vocabularies, and there is no evidence that these terms developed as a sophisticated extrapolation of previously existing naturalistic vocabularies. Religious language is a natural part of human discourse, because God is as involved in human life as are tables, chairs, birds, and trees.

(d) *Some God-language clearly literal*. Certain terms clearly refer to God literally, not figuratively. For example, take negative attributes such as "God is not a liar." What in that sentence could possibly be construed as figurative? *Not*, clearly, has its usual sense. *Liar* is also literal; we are distinguishing God from literal liars, not, in this case, figurative ones. As

27. When Pompeii was destroyed, the meaning of *Pompeii* remained.

another example, take *love*. Surely, as we noted (see *(a)*, above), there are many different referents here, that is, between divine and human love. Insofar as *love* has value here, however, it attributes to God what one would expect of human love at its best: self-giving, helping, commitment, sympathy, and so forth. It is surely not like the attribution of arms and eyes to God, for we can meaningfully say that God does not "really" have arms and eyes, but we cannot make a similar disclaimer about God's love. God's love is more than our language can grasp, but surely it is not less. To say that *love* applies to God only in a figurative sense has the force of diminishing content without adding anything.

(e) *Van Til on "analogy."* Van Til does teach that all of our thinking about God is "analogical," but in his vocabulary *analogical* means "reflective of God's original thought."[28] Because both "literal" and "figurative" language can be "analogical" in Van Til's sense, his view of analogy does not resolve the question before us. As far as I know, Van Til nowhere comments on the question of whether or not language about God can be literal.

(f) *Never compromise God's knowability*. We must be careful, here as elsewhere, about drawing such sharp distinctions between God's thought and ours that we compromise His knowability. Even where figurative expressions are used about God, they may convey truth. The figurative character of some language in Scripture does not rob that language of meaning. "God is a rock" is true, and it conveys meaning that could not have been conveyed by a literal expression. God has made rocks, and He has ordained them from before the foundation of the world to reflect His strength and constancy. The rock is a revelation of God, and it is for that reason that it is a suitable figure.[29] Such language is not a mere expediency that God is forced to use despite its falsehood. As John Murray says, "We know God by means of analogy, but what we know is not a mere analogy, but the true God."[30]

6. Does God's "thought-content" always differ from man's? *Content* played a crucial role in the OPC controversy. Van Til's followers insisted that when a man thinks about a particular rose, for example, the "content"

28. *Reflective* has two senses here. In one sense, all human thought reflects God; in another sense, only obedient, believing thought does. This distinction corresponds to the traditional Reformed distinction between "wider" and "narrower" senses of the image of God. Unbelieving thought does not image God's truth and goodness (except in ironic ways), but it does reflect God in its skillfulness. See our later discussion of the unbeliever's knowledge.

29. See Kline, *Images*, for biblical data about the whole creation as an image of God.

30. Paraphrased from Murray's unpublished "Lectures on the Doctrine of God." He is, I think, using analogy in the traditional linguistic sense, not in Van Til's sense described above in *(e)*.

in his mind always differs from the "content" in God's mind when He thinks about the same rose.[31] It would be a mistake for us to assume that *thought-content* has a perfectly clear meaning and then to leap on one bandwagon or another. In my booklet *Van Til the Theologian*, I argue that the idea of "thought-content" is ambiguous.[32] In some senses, I would argue, Van Til is right; in others, Clark. (a) *Content* can refer to *mental images*. I think Van Til has this in mind, for example, on page 184 of *Introduction*: "When man says that God is eternal, he can, because of his own limitations, think of God only as being very old. He can think of eternity only in terms of endless years." That statement is false, unless "think of" refers to imaging of some sort, the imagining of what it would be like for us to be eternal. If imaging is not in view, then there certainly are ways in which we can think of eternity as other than endless time. Otherwise, how do theologians (including Van Til) come to define eternity as supratemporal? If *content* in the controversy means "mental images," then the whole argument is speculative and foolish. We have no ground for supposing that God thinks in anything like our mental images. (Even we can think without using images.) And even if He does, there is no reason to suppose that God's images are the same as ours or that they are not.

(b) *Content* can refer to the *objects of thought*. To say that God and man have the same "thought-content," then, would simply mean that God and man are thinking about the same things. If this is the meaning of *thought-content*, then obviously God and man have common thought-content. I have thoughts about my typewriter; surely God also has thoughts about it![33]

31. Cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 172, on the proposition "2 x 2 = 4." Van Til denies that "there must be identity of content between the divine and human minds on such a proposition."

32. Interestingly, Van Til confirms the ambiguousness of this concept in a different context. On page 194 of *Introduction*, he argues that Christians and non-Christians do not agree on any "thought content" about God. On page 195, however, he argues vigorously that the non-Christian's knowledge of God is an actual thought content, with which, presumably, the Christian would agree. And even more remarkably, on pages 194 and 195, "thought content" is contrasted with "mere formality," rendering the latter expression similarly ambiguous.

33. Halsey ("Critique," 129) actually takes issue with my statement that God and man can have the same beliefs and think about the same things. I confess that this leaves me entirely baffled. With regard to God's beliefs and objects of thought, I am willing to posit the same differences that I have posited elsewhere, that is, God's beliefs are the beliefs of the Creator and therefore original as opposed to derivative, and so forth. But for Halsey to deny the continuity that I assert makes no sense at all to me. I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Does Halsey mean to say that God does not affirm that fact? It is hard for me to believe that any Reformed scholar could maintain anything so absurd. Halsey's concern, of course, is to insist upon the Creator-creature distinction at every point; thus the idea of "sameness," in his view, must be rejected all along the line. In my view, however, this is an extremely mechanical

(c) *Thought-content* could refer to *beliefs* or *judgments of truth*. Certainly it is possible for God and man to have the same "thought-content" in that sense; Scripture constantly urges us to agree with God's judgments. Van Til's concept of "analogical reasoning" is inconceivable without reference to such sameness.

(d) *Content* could also refer to the *meanings* associated with words in the mind. On this point, see problem areas *4* and *5*.

(e) *Content* can refer to the *fullness* of one's understanding. On this interpretation, clearly there is always a divine-human difference, because God's concept of anything is always richer and fuller than any human's concept of the same thing.

(f) Finally, *content* can refer to all of the *attributes* of the thought under consideration. Because God's thoughts are all divine in quality and because none of ours are (see above under "discontinuities"), in this respect there is always a difference in content between God's thoughts and ours. Nevertheless, the ambiguities we have discerned in the expression "thought-content" ought to convince us against any undefined use of it. I am sure that confusion over the meaning of this phrase was a significant hindrance to mutual understanding between the Clark and Van Til groups.

7. Is there a "qualitative difference" between God's thoughts and ours? *Qualitative difference* was the great rallying cry of the Van Til forces against the Clark party. On the one hand, Clark (we are told) held that there was only a "quantitative difference" between God's thoughts and ours, that is, that God knew more facts than we do. On the other hand, Van Til believed that the difference was "qualitative." I am willing to affirm that there is a qualitative difference between God's thoughts and ours, but I am not convinced of the value of the phrase in the present controversy. What is a "qualitative difference"? Most simply defined, it is a difference in quality. Thus a difference between blue and green could be a "qualitative difference." Such a usage, of course, is totally inadequate to do justice to the Creator-creature distinction, which the Van Til forces were trying to do. In fairness, however, we should also recognize that in English *qualitative difference* generally refers to *very large* differences in quality, not differences like

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approach, oblivious to the different kinds of "samenesses" there are. Furthermore, merely to reject the concept of "sameness" across the board creates serious theological problems. If the wrong sort of "sameness" threatens the Creator-creature distinction, denial of all sameness threatens the presence of God in our world, for it renders impossible the thought that God and man ever dwell in the same universe, share the same history, or enter into meaningful relationships with one another.

that between blue and green. We tend to speak of "qualitative differences" where the differences are not capable of quantitative measurement. But even on such a maximal definition, the phrase still denotes differences *within* creation; it does not uniquely define the Creator-creature distinction. I therefore tend to avoid the phrase, though I have no objection to it. Although it is appropriate to use a superlative term like this to describe the Creator-creature relation, we should cure ourselves of the notion that *qualitative* automatically takes us outside of the sphere of intracreational relations and that no other terms may be substituted for it in such a context.[34] Rather than using *qualitative difference*, I prefer to use terms that are more directly related to the covenantal terminology of Scripture, for example differences between Creator and creature, Lord and servant, Father and son, original and derivative, self-attesting and attested by another. In some contexts, those terms can also designate intracreational relations; all terms in human language can apply to something or other within creation. But when they refer to the divine-human difference, they are no less clear than *qualitative difference*, and in most respects, they are clearer. The suggestion that *qualitative difference* somehow designates a larger difference than these other terms or that it is more appropriate than the biblical terms to denote the difference in view is entirely groundless. It was most unfortunate that *qualitative difference* became a kind of partisan rallying cry in the OPC controversy. For such work the phrase is entirely unsuited.

Let us summarize our discussion of the incomprehensibility of God. The lordship of God must be recognized in the area of thought, as well as in all other aspects of human life. We must confess that God's thoughts are wholly sovereign and therefore sharply different from ours, which are the thoughts of servants. God's being, too, is quite beyond our comprehension, but we must not interpret God's incomprehensibility in such a way that we compromise the knowability of God or the involvement of God with us in the process of thinking and knowing. God is revealed, and we know Him truly, but it is in that revelation and because of that revelation that we stand in wonder. The "Clark Case" is a classic example of the hurt that can be done when people dogmatize over difficult theological issues without taking the trouble first to understand one another, to analyze ambiguities in their formulations, and to recognize more than one kind of theological danger to be avoided.

34. This notion seems to pervade Halsey's article. He continually suggests that since I do not speak of "qualitative differences," I must hold that the differences in view are merely "quantitative." That suggestion is entirely false.

Knowing as a Covenant Relationship

We have been considering the implications of God's lordship for our knowledge of Him. We have seen how His lordship implies His knowability and, at the same time, His incomprehensibility. Now we want to ask more specifically, What kind of knowledge is consistent with God's lordship? Above all, we must recognize that human knowledge of God is covenantal in character, as all human activities are. Knowing is the act of a covenant servant of God. That means that in knowing God, as in any other aspect of human life, we are subject to God's control and authority, confronted with His inevitable presence. As we learned in our discussion of God's incomprehensibility, we dare not aspire to the kind of knowledge that God has of himself; we must be satisfied with the kind of knowledge that a servant may have of his Lord, even when that knowledge is a knowledge of mystery or of our own ignorance. Let us now look at this "servant-knowledge" in more detail. I will suggest that servant-knowledge is a knowledge *about* God as Lord and a knowledge that is *subject to* God as Lord.

A Knowledge About God as Lord

Knowing God is knowing Him as Lord, knowing His name *Yahweh* (Exod. 14:18; 33:11—34:9; 1 Kings 8:43; 1 Chron. 28:6–9; Pss. 83:18; 91:14; Prov. 9:10; Isa. 43:3; 52:6; Jer. 9:23; 16:21; 33:2; Amos 5:8). As we saw earlier, God performs mighty acts "so that men may know that I am the Lord." This emphasis is prominent in the covenant treaty documents of Scripture.[35] At the very beginning of the treaty, the Great King proclaims His lordship: "I am the Lord thy God."

Knowing God as Lord involves knowing that *control*.[36] As mentioned earlier, God makes himself known through His mighty works, both in nature

35. Meredith Kline in his *Treaty of the Great King* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1963) has identified certain parts of Scripture (e.g., Exod. 20:1–17, the Book of Deuteronomy) as having the form of Hittite "suzerainty treaties," wherein a powerful king would impose his will on a lesser king. These documents generally included: (1) identification of the great king—his name, (2) historical prologue—the past relations between the great king and the lesser king, focusing on the ways in which the former has helped the latter, (3) laws—(a) fundamental covenant allegiance, called "love," and (b) detailed commandments for the lesser (vassal) king to obey, (4) sanctions—blessings promised for obedience, curses for disobedience, (5) covenant administration—use of the documents, succession arrangements, and so forth. In the Decalogue and in Deuteronomy, God is the Great King, Israel the vassal. Kline argues that the Decalogue covenant is in fact the original part of the canon and that as God inspired additional Scripture, the additions continued to perform essentially the same functions: identification of the name of the Lord, covenant history, covenant law, covenant sanctions, and covenant administration.

36. Remarkably, the treaty pattern (both biblical and extrabiblical), as described by Kline, follows the control-authority-presence pattern closely. Following His name-identification,

(Rom. 1:18–20) and in history (Pss. 106:2, 8; 145:4, 12; Matt. 11:20f.; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4). These may be works of judgment (Exod. 14:18) or of grace (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17; Matt. 11:20f.). It also involves knowing His *authority*, knowing *that* He is the ultimate authority and knowing *what* He commands us to do. According to Genesis, Adam's first experience was to hear God's commands (Gen. 1:28f.; cf. 2:16f.). Man has never been without knowledge of God's will. Even unregenerated people know what God requires (Rom. 1:21, 32, possibly 2:14f.), and the redemptive covenants always involve renewed applications of God's statutes (Exod. 33:13; 34:5f.; 1 Chron. 28:6–9; Jer. 9:24). Furthermore, knowing God's authoritative will involves knowing that God is *present* as the one who unites us to Him in a covenant relationship. Adam walked and talked with God in the Garden of Eden, and even the unbeliever sees God clearly (Rom. 1:19f.). All men are in God's image (Gen. 1:27ff.; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9), and so they know God as He is reflected in their own lives; God is so close that He is inescapable. In redemption, God draws near to His people anew, addresses them intimately (cf. the "I-thou" language of the Decalogue, as if God were addressing only one person), and dwells with them and blesses them (Deut. 33:13).

A Knowledge Subject to God as Lord

To say, however, that knowing is covenantal is more than to say it is *about* the covenant. Knowing the Lord is not merely knowing about God's lordship, though it certainly is that. Knowing is a process that itself is *subject* to God's lordship. Like all other processes, human knowledge is under God's control, subject to His authority, and exposed to His presence. Thus God is involved in our knowing, just as He is involved in the things we know about. The process of knowing itself, apart from any information gained by it, is a revelation of God. As we come to know about God, we inevitably come to know Him. Let us consider the lordship attributes in this regard.

Knowledge under God's control. First, our knowledge of God is always based on revelation. In our coming to know God, it is He who takes the initiative. He does not wait passively for us to discover Him, but He makes himself known. Furthermore—at least in the postfall context[37]—this revelation is

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the Lord describes His mighty works in the historical prologue (control), gives His laws (authority), and pronounces the blessings and cursings (presence). The "covenant administration" section, then, deals with the promulgation and enforcement of the covenant history, law, and sanctions.

37. Before the fall there was grace in the sense of undeserved blessing but not in the sense of a remission of wrath.

gracious; we do not deserve it, but God gives it as a "favor" to us as part of His redemptive mercy (Exod. 33:12f.; 1 Chron. 28:6–9; Prov. 2:6; Isa. 33:5f.; Jer. 9:23f.; 31:33f.; Matt. 11:25–28; John 17:3; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9f.; 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:25; 2 Peter 1:2f.; 2:20; 1 John 4:7). This process not only involves revelation in an objective sense (i.e., God creating the world and inspiring the Bible so that they reveal Him to an open heart), it also involves revelation in a subjective sense, what the Bible calls "illumination" or "enlightenment"—the work of the Holy Spirit that opens our hearts, so that we acknowledge, understand, and rightly use His truth (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:18; Heb. 6:4; 10:32; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus the origin of knowledge is trinitarian: The Father knows all and reveals truth to us by the grace of His Son through the work of the Spirit in our hearts. Note how each person of the Trinity is involved in the knowing process (cf. 1 Sam. 2:3; Ps. 73:11; Isa. 11:2; 28:9; 53:11; Matt. 11:25f.; Eph. 1:17; Col. 2:3). Thus it is all of God, all of grace. We know God because He has first known us as His children (cf. Exod. 22:12; 1 Cor. 8:1–3; Gal. 4:9).[38]

Knowledge subject to God's authority. In Scripture knowledge is very closely linked with righteousness and holiness (cf. Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). These "go together" (1 Cor. 8:1–3; 1 John 4:7f.). Knowledge of God, in the fullest sense, is inevitably an *obedient* knowledge. Let me sketch five important relations between knowledge and obedience.

1. *Knowledge of God produces obedience* (John 17:26; 2 Peter 1:3, 5; 2:18–20). God's friends necessarily seek to obey Him (John 14:15, 21; etc.), and the better they know Him, the more obedient they become. Such a relation to God is inevitably a sanctifying experience; being near Him transforms us, as the biblical pictures of God's glory being transferred to His people, of His Spirit descending on them, and of their being conformed to His image indicate.

2. *Obedience to God leads to knowledge* (John 7:17; Eph. 3:17–19; 2 Tim. 2:25f.; 1 John 3:16; cf. Isa. 33:6; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 15:33).[39] This is the converse of the previous point; there is a "circular" relation between knowledge and obedience in Scripture. Neither is unilaterally prior to the other, either

38. The natural question at this point is, If knowledge is a product of redemptive grace, then how can the unregenerate be said to know God at all? The answer is that there are two kinds of "knowledge of God," knowledge in faith and knowledge in unbelief. We will deal with "knowledge in unbelief" later. Here we will only speak about the believer's knowledge.

39. The "fear of God" is that basic attitude of reverence and awe that inevitably carries with it a desire to do God's will.

temporally or causally. They are inseparable and simultaneous. Each enriches the other (cf. 2 Peter 1:5f.). In my view, some Reformed "intellectualists" (Gordon Clark has applied this label to himself) have failed to do justice to this circularity. Even in the writings of J. Gresham Machen, one often finds the slogan "life is built upon doctrine" used in a way that distorts the fact that in some senses the opposite is also true. It is certainly true that if you want to obey God more completely, you must get to know Him; but it is also true that if you want to know God better, you must seek to obey Him more perfectly.[40]

This emphasis does not contradict our earlier point that knowledge is by grace. Knowledge and obedience are *given* to us simultaneously by God on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice. Once they are given, God continues to give them in greater and greater fullness. But He uses means; He uses our obedience as a means of giving us knowledge, and vice versa.

3. *Obedience is knowledge, and knowledge is obedience*. Very often in Scripture, *obedience* and *knowledge* are used as near synonyms, either by being set in apposition to one another (e.g., Hos. 6:6) or by being used to define one another (e.g., Jer. 22:16). Occasionally, too, *knowledge* appears as one term in a general list of distinctly ethical categories (e.g., Hos. 4:1f.) and so is presented as a form of obedience (cf. Jer. 31:31f.; John 8:55 [note the context, esp. vv. 19, 32, 41]; 1 Cor. 2:6 [cf. vv. 13–15; "mature" here is an ethical-religious quality]; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:8–11; 2 Thess. 1:8f.; 2 Peter 1:5; 2:20f.). In these passages, obedience is not merely a consequence of knowledge but a constitutive aspect of it. Without obedience there is no knowledge, and vice versa.[41]

The point here is not that *obedience* and *knowledge* are synonymous terms, interchangeable in all contexts. They do differ. *Knowledge* designates the friendship between ourselves and God (see below), and *obedience* designates our activity within that relation. But these two ideas are so inseparable from one another that often they can legitimately be used as synonyms, each describing the other from a particular perspective.

40. The circle goes even farther: knowledge originates in God's grace and leads to more grace (Exod. 33:13), which leads to more knowledge. In this case, however, there is a "unilateral" beginning. Grace originates knowledge, not vice versa.

41. F. Gerald Downing in his *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (SCM Press, 1964) equates knowledge with obedience in such a way that he actually denies the existence of a revealed knowledge of God in the conceptual sense of knowledge. In my opinion, he presses his case much too far (see, for example, his exegesis of Phil. 3:8ff., which is somewhat bizarre). But he makes many useful suggestions, and the book is very helpful in combating our traditional picture of "knowledge" as something merely intellectual. ("Merely" can be such a helpful word in theology! If Downing had said that knowledge is not merely intellectual, he would have said something true and helpful.)

4. *Thus obedience is the criterion of knowledge*. To determine if someone knows God, we do not merely give him a written exam; we examine his life. Atheism in Scripture is a practical, not merely a theoretical, position; denying God is seen in the corruption of one's life (Pss. 10:4ff.; 14:1–7; 53). Similarly, the test of Christian faith or knowledge is a holy life (Matt. 7:21ff.; Luke 8:21; John 8:47; 14:15, 21, 23f.; 15:7, 10, 14; 17:6, 17; 1 John 2:3–5; 4:7; 5:2f.; 2 John 6f.; Rev. 12:17; 14:12). The ultimate reason for that is that God is the real, living, and true God, not an abstraction concerning whom we can only theorize, but one who is profoundly involved with each of our lives. The very "I am" of *Yahweh* indicates His presence. As Francis Schaeffer says, He is "the God who is there." Thus our involvement with Him is a practical involvement, an involvement with Him not only in our theoretical activity but in all of life. To disobey is to be culpably ignorant of God's involvement in our lives. So disobedience involves ignorance and obedience involves knowledge.[42]

5. *Therefore it is clear that knowledge itself must be sought in an obedient way*. There are commandments in Scripture that bear very directly on how we are to seek knowledge, that identify the differences between true and false knowledge. In this connection, we should meditate on 1 Corinthians 1–2; 3:18–23; 8:1–3; and James 3:13–18. When we seek to know God obediently, we assume the fundamental point that Christian knowledge is a knowledge under authority, that our quest for knowledge is not autonomous but subject to Scripture. And if that is true, it follows that the truth (and to some extent the content) of Scripture must be regarded as the most certain knowledge that we have. If this knowledge is to be the criterion for all other knowledge, if it is to govern our acceptance or rejection of other propositions, then there is no proposition that can call it into question. Thus when we know God, we know Him more certainly, more surely than we know anything else. When He speaks to us, our understanding of His Word must govern our understanding of everything else. This is a difficult point because, after all, our understanding of Scripture is fallible and may sometimes need to be corrected. But those corrections may be made only on the basis of a deeper understanding of Scripture, not on the basis of some other kind of knowledge.

It is at this point that we introduce ourselves to the term for which Van Til's apologetics is best known, the term *presupposition*. A presupposition is a belief that takes precedence over another and therefore serves as a criterion

42. A number of ideas in this paragraph come from Shepherd's lectures, cited in note 12.

for another. An ultimate presupposition is a belief over which no other takes precedence.[43] For a Christian, the content of Scripture must serve as his ultimate presupposition. Our beliefs about Scripture may be corrected by other beliefs about Scripture, but relative to the body of extrascriptural information that we possess, those beliefs are presuppositional in character. This doctrine is merely the outworking of the lordship of God in the area of human thought. It merely applies the doctrine of scriptural infallibility to the realm of knowing. Seen in this way, I really cannot understand why any evangelical Christian should have a problem in accepting it. We are merely affirming that human knowledge is servant-knowledge, that in seeking to know anything our first concern is to discover what our Lord thinks about it and to agree with His judgment, to think His thoughts after Him. What alternative could there possibly be? Would anyone dare to suggest that though we commit ourselves unreservedly to Christ, there is no place for such commitments in our intellectual work? Thus this doctrine of presuppositions purely and simply asserts the lordship of Christ over human thought. Anything less than this is unacceptable to Him.

Knowledge exposed to God's presence. We commonly distinguish between knowledge of facts ("knowing that . . ."), knowledge of skills ("knowing how . . ."), and knowledge of persons ("knowing whom . . .").[44] These three are related, but they are not identical with one another. Knowing a person involves knowing facts about him (contrary to some "personalistic" theologians), but one can know facts about someone without knowing him, and vice versa. A political scientist may know many facts about the president of the United States without being able to say that he "knows" the president. The White House gardener may know far fewer facts and yet be able to say that he knows the president quite well.

All three kinds of knowledge are mentioned in Scripture, and all are important theologically. A believer must know certain facts about God—who

43. Some may feel that this definition of presupposition has too much of an intellectualistic ring. Of course, in this context we are concerned mainly with beliefs, propositions, and so forth. But I would certainly want to stress that "presuppositions" are rooted in "basic commitments" of the heart. Whether we use the term "presupposition" as defined above or whether we define it as "basic commitment" and find another term to employ in the narrowly epistemological context does not seem to me to be a very important problem.

44. Knowledge of things might be a fourth category. Often when we talk about knowing things (bananas, Switzerland, the price structure of the grain market), we are thinking about factual knowledge. Other times, or perhaps always to an extent, we are thinking of an acquaintance somewhat analogous to the knowledge of persons. I do not think it would be edifying to try to sort out those questions now.

He is, what He has done. Note the importance of the "historical prologue" within the covenant structure: the Lord begins the covenant document by telling what He has done. The covenant begins in grace. Those who disparage the importance of factual knowledge in Christianity are in fact disparaging the message of grace (cf. Ps. 100:3; Rom. 3:19; 6:3; 1 John 2:3; 3:2—random examples of factual knowledge that is vital to the believer). Furthermore, a believer is one who learns new skills—how to obey God, how to pray, how to love—as well as skills in which believers differ from one another—preaching, evangelizing, diaconal service, and so forth (cf. Matt. 7:11; Col. 4:6; 1 Tim. 3:5). But (and perhaps most importantly) Christian knowledge is knowledge of a person. It is knowing God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.[45]

Sometimes in the Scriptures, "knowing" a person refers mainly to knowing facts about him, but most often it means being involved with him either as a friend or as an enemy (cf. Gen. 29:5; Matt. 25:24; Acts 19:15; 1 Cor. 16:15; 1 Thess. 5:12. The common use of *know* to refer to sexual intercourse should also be noted at this point, e.g., Gen. 4:1). When Scripture speaks of God "knowing" men, generally the reference is not to factual knowledge at all (since it goes without saying that God knows the facts). In such contexts, *knowing* generally means "loving" or "befriending" (note Exod. 33:12, 17; Ps. 1:5f.; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Nahum 1:7; Matt. 25:12; John 10:14, 27). This is frequently an important exegetical point, especially in Romans 8:29. The statement there that God "foreknew" certain persons cannot mean that He knew that they would believe, and thus it cannot teach that predestination is based on God's foresight of man's autonomous choices. Rather, the verse teaches that salvation originates in God's sovereign knowledge (i.e., love) of His elect. Hence Scripture almost never speaks of God "knowing" an unbeliever; the only examples I can find of that (John 2:25; 5:42) clearly refer to factual knowledge.

Man's knowledge of God, then, is very similar to God's knowledge of man. To know Him is to be involved with Him as a friend or as an enemy. For the believer, to know Him is to love Him—hence the strong emphasis on obedience (as we have seen) as a constitutive aspect of the knowledge of God. Here, however, we wish to focus on the fact that the God whom we

45. Although the three kinds of knowledge are distinct, each involves the others. You cannot know a person without knowing some facts about him and having some ability to relate meaningfully to him, and so forth. One can, therefore, describe Christian knowledge under three "perspectives": as learning facts and mastering the implications and uses of those facts (Gordon Clark) or as developing skills in using facts in our relations with one another and with God or as learning to know God, in which context we learn facts and skills.

know and whom we love is of necessity present with us, and therefore our relationship with Him is a truly personal one. The intimacy of love assumes the present reality of the beloved. We can love someone at a distance but only if that person plays a significant, continuing role in our thoughts, decisions, and emotions and in that sense is near to us. But if God controls all things and stands as the ultimate authority for all of our decisions, then He confronts us at every moment; His power is manifest everywhere, and His Word makes a constant claim on our attention. He is the most unavoidable reality there is and the most intimate, since His control and authority extend to the deepest recesses of the soul. Because of the very comprehensiveness of His control and authority, we may not think of God as far away. (Earthly controllers and authorities seem far away precisely because their authority and control are so limited.) Thus God is not merely a controller or authority, He is also an intimate acquaintance.

The covenantal language of Scripture brings out this intimacy. God speaks to Israel using the second person singular, as if the whole nation were one person; God uses the language of "I and thou." He proclaims to His people blessings and curses, the mark of His continuing (priestly) presence. As the history of redemption progresses, the covenant relationship is described in terms of marriage (Hosea; Eph. 5; etc.), sonship (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14–17; etc.), and friendship (John 15:13–15).[46]

The sense of the believer doing all things not only to the glory of God but in God's presence (*coram deo*) has been a precious truth to Reformed people. God not only controls and commands, but in all of our experience He is, ultimately, the "one with whom we have to do." Nothing can be farther from the deterministic, impersonalistic, intellectualistic, unemotional brand of religion represented in the popular caricature of Calvinism.

In summary, "knowledge of God" essentially refers to a person's friendship (or enmity) with God. That friendship presupposes knowledge in other senses—knowledge of facts about God, knowledge of skills in righteous living, and so forth. It therefore involves a covenantal response of the whole person to God in all areas of life, either in obedience or in disobedience. It involves, most focally, a knowledge of God's lordship—of His control, His authority, and His present reality.

46. Some writers find great "progress" being made here, from legal-covenantal categories to intimate-personal ones. I, however, see these latter metaphors as the natural outworking of the intimacy already involved in the covenant relationship. What could be more intimate than the relationship assumed in Deuteronomy 6:5? The idea that law is necessarily something cold and impersonal stems from modern humanistic thinking, not from Scripture.

Excursus: Wisdom and Truth

The biblical concepts of wisdom and truth are similar to the concept of knowledge in important ways. Although *knowledge* broadly designates the covenantal friendship (or enmity) between God and man, *wisdom* focuses on the element of know-how, or skill. A wise man is one who has the ability to *do* something—not just a factual knowledge of something but also the ability to *use* his knowledge correctly. That use may be in various areas, for example, Bezalel the son of Uri was "filled with the Spirit of God and with wisdom" (NIV reads "skill," "ability") to do the craft work for the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–6). But more often, *wisdom* has a moral-religious connotation, so that we may define it as "the skill of godly living" (cf. esp. James 3:13–17). We can see, then, how wisdom, like knowledge, involves an understanding of God's lordship as well as actual obedience to the Lord (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7).[47] We can also see that wisdom, like knowledge, is a gift of God's grace and has a trinitarian origin: God the Father is the source of wisdom, in the Son are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, and the Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom. Wisdom is communicated by the Word and by the Spirit (cf. Exod. 28:3; 31:3; Deut. 34:9; Prov. 3:19; 8:30; 28:7–9; 30:5; Jer. 8:8f.; Acts 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; 2:6–16; Col. 2:3; 3:16; 2 Tim. 3:15).

Truth is used in various senses in Scripture. We may distinguish a "metaphysical" sense (the true is the absolute, the complete, as opposed to the relative, the partial, etc.—John 6:32, 35; 15:1; 17:3; Heb. 8:21; 1 John 5:20), an "epistemological" sense (the true is the correct—Deut. 17:4; 1 Kings 10:6; Eph. 4:24—i.e., "propositional truth"), and an "ethical" sense ("walking in" truth, i.e., doing right—Neh. 9:33; Pss. 15:2; 25:5; 26:3; 51:6 [note the parallel with wisdom]; 86:11; Ezek. 18:9; Hos. 4:1; John 3:20f.; Gal. 5:7; 1 John 1:6).[48] Truth, like knowledge and wisdom, comes by grace, by trinitarian communication, by Word and by Spirit (Dan. 10:21; John 8:31f.; 14:6; 17:17 [cf. vv. 6, 8; 2 Sam. 7:28; Ps. 119:142, 160]; Rom. 2:8; 2 Cor. 4:2; 6:7; Gal. 2:5; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:12; 1 Tim. 3:15; Jas. 3:14; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 2:2; Rev. 6:10; 15:3; 16:7).

Although the biblical concepts of wisdom and truth are not precisely synonymous with "knowledge," they corroborate certain emphases made in our discussion of knowledge. Although both wisdom and truth are significantly related to propositional or conceptual knowledge, neither can be fully

47. *Wisdom* and *knowledge* are nearly synonymous in Proverbs and in other biblical wisdom literature.

48. Regarding this threefold distinction, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1957), 123–28, and Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 382f.

explained by propositional categories. Being "wise" or "knowing the truth" in the fullest biblical sense is not merely knowing facts about theology (nor is it a kind of mystical knowledge devoid of propositional content). Wisdom and truth, like knowledge, are given by God's grace and in the deepest senses of the terms, involve obedience and intimate, personal involvement between Creator and creature.

The Unbeliever's Knowledge

We are now faced with a problem. If *knowledge* in Scripture not only involves factual knowledge but also is (1) a gift of God's redemptive grace, (2) an obedient covenantal response to God, and (3) a loving, personal involvement, how can the unbeliever be said to know God at all? We have seen that according to Scripture, the unbeliever does know God (Rom. 1:21), but how can that be?

Well, Scripture also tells us that unbelievers do not know God (cf. the passages listed earlier). Evidently, then, there is a sense (or senses) in which they do know Him and a sense (or senses) in which they do not. We now must try to sort out some of these distinctions.

Similarities

In important ways, the unbeliever's knowledge is like the believer's. Surveying the outline of the last section, we can say (1) that God is knowable but incomprehensible to believer and unbeliever alike and (2) that in both cases the knowledge can be described as covenant knowledge. Both believer and unbeliever know *about* God's control, authority, and presence. The knowledge of the unbeliever, like that of the believer, is a knowledge that God is Lord (cf. passages mentioned earlier). And both forms of knowledge are *subject to* God's control, authority, and presence. The unbeliever, like the believer, knows God only on God's initiative, though he refuses to obey that authority. His knowledge is not only a knowledge about God, but a knowledge of God himself (Rom. 1:21). Indeed, it is a confrontation with God as present, though he experiences the presence of God's wrath (Rom. 1:18), not His redemptive blessing (cf. Exod. 14:4, where the Egyptians' knowledge of God occurs in the midst of the experience of judgment).[49]

49. Of course, the unbeliever does experience the blessing of God's "common grace" (Matt. 5:45ff.; Acts 14:17ff.)—God's nonredemptive kindnesses by which He seeks to draw men lovingly toward repentance and faith.

Differences

The essential differences may be derived from the preceding discussion. The unbeliever's knowledge entails (1) a lack of saving grace, (2) a refusal to obey, and (3) a lack of redemptive blessing. But we must be more specific. How do these differences affect the consciousness of the unbeliever and his expression of that consciousness as he lives, makes decisions, argues, philosophizes, theologizes, and so forth? Let us examine various possibilities.

a. Revelation Makes No Impact on the Unbeliever

We might be tempted to say that the unbeliever's "knowledge" consists simply in the fact that he is surrounded by God's revelation, though that revelation makes no impact whatever on his consciousness. On such a view, we could certainly say that in a sense God has revealed himself to everyone. We could also speak emphatically about the effects of depravity on knowledge. So depraved is the sinner that he banishes God from his mind altogether; God's revelation has absolutely no impact on his thinking.[50] I find this view inadequate for the following reasons. (1) According to this view, we could speak of God's revealing himself to fallen man, but we certainly could not speak of fallen man's having knowledge of God. But Scripture portrays unbelievers as knowing God. (2) Scripture represents unbelievers, and even devils, as constantly interacting with God's revelation. God is not only revealed to them but "clearly seen" (Rom. 1:20). They "know" God (Rom. 1:21), and they "exchange the truth for a lie" (Rom. 1:23, 25). But how can one exchange something that has never entered his mind? According to Scripture, unbelievers also speak truly of God, as we will see.

b. The Unbeliever Ought to Know but Doesn't

Jim S. Halsey (mentioned earlier in another connection) suggests in his book *For a Time Such as This*[51] that the unbeliever ought to know from nature alone that the true God is the Creator of the world, that His providence is over all His works, and so forth. He adds, "The above, it should be carefully noted, are conclusions to which every man ought to come; it is not to be implied, however, that any man actually can come to them. . . . 'Ought' does not

50. In some translations of the Bible, Romans 1:28 suggests something like the following. The unbeliever does not want to have God in his consciousness, and so his consciousness is devoid of God. However, *epignosei* in Greek means much more than "consciousness," and in any case the rejection envisaged in the verse is a deliberate act that presupposes at one point a knowledge of God; the unbeliever is rejecting something he knows.

51. Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1976.

necessarily imply ability."[52] Halsey's point is that the unbeliever's knowledge is only potential, not actual, that though he is obligated to know, he does not actually know. Van Til also talks that way on occasion, but I am convinced that such expressions are inadequate. Essentially, it is the same position as *a* above—the unbeliever does not really know; he is merely obligated to know. But Scripture says that the unbeliever does know, as we have seen. Furthermore, neither Halsey nor Van Til holds this position consistently, as we will see.

c. He Knows God "Psychologically"

On page 65 of his book, Halsey suggests another formulation: the unbeliever knows God in a "psychological," not in an "epistemological," sense.[53] It is a bit unclear to me what Halsey means by "epistemological," but in the following pages he repeatedly relates it to "interpretative activity." Thus, he seems to argue, the unbeliever knows God, but his interpretative activity always denies God. However, (1) this view contradicts *b*, which Halsey apparently also wishes to hold. According to this view, the unbeliever's knowledge is not only potential, but actual, even if only "psychological." In his book, Halsey shows no awareness of any problem here. (2) What does it mean to speak of a knowledge in man ("psychological") that is completely devoid of "interpretation." Does not all knowledge involve "interpretation" in some sense? Does not knowledge necessarily involve an "interpretation" of what is known? I confess that I do not find this view to be intelligible.

d. He Represses His Knowledge Psychologically

Some students of Reformed apologetics have been tempted to think of the matter in somewhat Freudian terms, that is, the unbeliever "represses" his knowledge to such an extent that it becomes wholly subconscious or unconscious.[54] This view, unlike the others, presents a somewhat intelligible sense in which we can speak of an unbeliever's "knowledge" but at the same time regard his depravity as so radical that it banishes the knowledge of God from "consciousness." The problem here, however, is that Scripture speaks of unbelievers—and even devils!—as (at least sometimes) conscious of the

52. Halsey, 63.

53. Van Til uses some of the same terminology, as Halsey points out, but I'm not sure he uses it as Halsey does. In any case, it is clear (see below) that Van Til (in contrast with Halsey) does not regard this distinction as a definitive solution to the problem.

54. Van Til occasionally speaks this way. Note his frequent refrain that the unbeliever knows the truth "deep down," and sometimes his language is even more psychologistic than that. However, I do not think this representation is consistent with other things that Van Til says, nor do I think it is at all central to his perspective.

truth and willing to affirm it (see Matt. 23:3f.; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; 8:28; John 3:2; Acts 16:17; James 2:19).

e. His Agreements with Believers Are "Purely Formal"

Every now and then, Van Til refers to "agreements" between believers and unbelievers as being "purely formal," that is, the two use the same words to express utterly different meanings.[55] Certainly situations like this do arise, for example when heretical theologians use *revelation* to refer to their own religious insights. Clearly this is one way in which unbelief suppresses the truth. It would be wrong, however, to generalize and to say that all agreements between unbelievers and Scripture have this character. (1) If that were true, the unbeliever could not be said to have knowledge; his "knowledge" would be only apparent. If I say "2 + 2 = 4" but mean by it "2 + 2 = 7," I have not expressed any knowledge, only error. But without genuine knowledge, Romans 1 tells us, the unbeliever could excuse himself. (2) Scripture does not present the statements of Satan or of unbelievers as only *formally* true (see the list under *d* above). Such statements are an artful mix of truth and error. (3) If unbelievers spoke only formal truth, then communication with them would be impossible; a Christian could not speak to them of trees because to them *tree* would not refer to trees. (4) I doubt that there is any such thing as a *purely* formal agreement. Even the decision to "use the same words" in a conversation (about trees or God) is a decision that presupposes more than a formal knowledge of truth. Even when the modern theologian uses *revelation* to refer to his own religious insights, he shows that he knows something about his religious insights, about the potentialities of *revelation*, and about the truth that he artfully seeks to avoid.

f. His "Knowledge" Is Always Falsified by Its Context

Or should we say that the unbeliever accepts propositions that are true in isolation but falsified in the context he supplies for them?[56] For example, the unbeliever says truly that "the rose is red," but the statement becomes false when seen in the unbeliever's overall framework of thought, that is, "the not-created-by-the-triune-God rose is red because of chance." And since statements are properly understood "in context," rather than "out of context," we can say that properly understood, all the unbeliever's statements are false. Well, it is true that a normally true statement can be used

55. Cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 92, 113; *Defense of the Faith* (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1955, 1967), 59.

56. Cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 26.

to communicate falsehood when put into a false context. And it is certainly true that the antitheistic framework (which every unbeliever adopts) is a false context. But the idea that true sentences used as part of a false system thereby become false themselves is a kind of idealistic theory of language that has no Christian basis and would be rejected by almost all linguists, including idealist ones! We may legitimately assert that unbelievers do sometimes repress the truth by trying to integrate it into a comprehensive framework that is false, but (as in *e*) we should not generalize so much that we say that all unbelievers always do that. To say that (even accepting the questionable linguistic premises) would be to deny to the unbeliever anything that could legitimately be called "knowledge."[57]

g. His Knowledge Only Exists When He Is Unreflective

Somewhat related to the above (and to *c*) is Van Til's willingness to say that unbelievers speak truth when they are unreflective but not in their "systems of thought."[58] There is some point to this. Typically, non-Christian philosophers seek to use their philosophies to articulate and to inculcate their opposition to the truth; they seek to make their unbelief plausible, to show how the facts are best dealt with on an unbelieving basis. Since they tend to devote more effort and energy into suppressing the truth in their theoretical work than in their practical life, one would expect that they would be more off guard in practical situations, that they would be more inclined then unwittingly to acknowledge God. Well, I think this is usually the case, but certainly this is nothing more than a rough-and-ready generalization. We have no basis for denying exceptions to this rule, and we certainly have no justification for locating here the basic difference between believing and unbelieving knowledge. Would anyone suggest that an unbelieving philosopher is *necessarily* less depraved in his personal than in his professional life? And if he knows any truth at all, how can we claim that such knowledge will not influence his scholarship, as it influences his ordinary life? Scripture certainly never draws any line of this sort between life and theory. On the contrary, in Scripture thinking is part of life and is subject to the same moral and religious influences that rule the rest of life.

57. Thus when Van Til says that the unbeliever's knowledge is "true as far as it goes," we should not use that as a pretext for jumping into an idealist theory of language that, as I understand him, Van Til repudiates.

58. In a student paper, I criticized Van Til for claiming that the unbeliever "knew nothing truly." He wrote in the margins several times that in his view the ignorance of unbelievers is focused "in their system," cf. Van Til, *Introduction*, 81–84, 104.

h. He Doesn't Believe Enough Propositions

Gordon H. Clark, in his *Religion, Reason and Revelation*[59] (87–110) and in the *Johannine Logos*[60] (69–90), seeks to define saving faith as assent to certain propositions. He rejects the traditional Reformation position that faith as "trust" (*fiducia*) is more than "assent." An unbeliever, then, is simply one who has failed to assent to the requisite number of propositions. The devils in James 2:19, Clark argues, believe that God is one but fail to believe other propositions and therefore are lost. Clark is willing to describe this position as a form of "intellectualism," and so it is. We should not forget, however, Clark's strong insistence that the will is very much involved in assent and that in fact it is unwise to make any sharp distinction between will and intellect. Will is active in all intellectual acts, and vice versa. Furthermore, Clark's notion of "assent" is a robust one. To assent, in his view, is not merely to have ideas "flitting about in the brain," as Calvin liked to say, but to accept a proposition wholeheartedly enough to act on it. Thus Clark is not blind to the scriptural connection between knowledge and obedience. Although his view has a much more intellectualistic cast than the more traditional one, we could not seriously maintain that Clark's "assent" is less rich than the Reformation *fiducia*. My problem with Clark's view, rather, is that it overlooks some complications in the *psychology of belief*.

(i) Clark does recognize at one point that beliefs can be more or less strong, but this principle plays little role in his analysis. Generally speaking, for Clark either one believes a proposition or one does not, and the strength of that belief does not enter the analysis. But the question of relative strength of belief is quite relevant to our present concerns. A relatively weak belief may have very little influence on conduct and thus be far from the biblical *fiducia*. For example, a man may know that his son has left skates on the driveway but will give that knowledge so little attention that he trips over the skates and falls. But if that is the case, then surely faith must be analyzed in terms not only of assent but also of *strength of assent*. Merely to speak of assent here will not give us the kind of wholehearted commitment to the truth that Clark advocates. And I rather suspect that this is part of the reason why the Reformers were not satisfied to define faith as assent.

(ii) Once we recognize the importance of discussing the strength of belief in this connection, it becomes easier for us to see how a person can have *conflicting* beliefs. Often a person will believe inconsistent groups of

59. Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1961.

60. Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1972; cf. Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Trinity Foundation, 1983).

propositions, and he must be taught that these beliefs are indeed inconsistent. The most relevant example here is the case of self-deception. Someone knows that roulette is a losing proposition, but he somehow persuades himself that this is not true, at least for him, right now. And yet "deep down inside," he continues to know the truth. He believes it, yet does not believe it. The situation is paradoxical, and the psychology of it is difficult to construe, yet it happens all the time.[61] It becomes a bit more intelligible when we construe the two beliefs in terms of their relative strengths. The man's self-deceptive conviction that he can beat the odds governs his conduct up to a point. It keeps him at the tables. But after the evening is over and he surveys his losses, he may "wake up," he may reprove himself, since he "knew all along" that the odds were against him. And perhaps even at the roulette wheel he has misgivings. So the fact is that both beliefs, contradictory as they are, govern his actions, attitudes, and thoughts to some extent. Thus faith must involve not only assent, and that of a certain strength, but also the relative absence of contrary assents. Unbelief, then, may be compatible with some degree of assent to the truth of Scripture, perhaps even to all the truth of Scripture, provided that this assent is a weak assent, coupled with contrary assents that hold dominion over the person. (Cf. Rom. 6:14. The difference between believer and unbeliever is not that the believer is sinless but that sin has no "dominion" over him.)

(iii) The necessity of this sort of analysis is especially apparent with regard to the devils' knowledge (James 2:19). On Clark's view, the devils' knowledge is defective because they believe certain propositions but not others. But what propositions do they fail to believe? That God is sovereign? That Christ is divine? Speculations of this sort are rather implausible because in Scripture the devils are presented as highly intelligent beings who, generally speaking, know more about God's plans than human beings do. It makes much more sense to think of them as believing and disbelieving at the same time, with the disbelief in control of their behavior. Furthermore, the unbelief of the devils is surely not due to a mere lack of intelligence or information. It is a culpable disbelief. But what is a culpable disbelief if not a disbelief of what one *knows* to be true? The same, indeed, is the case with the human unbeliever. Thus unbelief is not merely lack of assent to certain propositions but lack of assent of a certain strength, coupled with contrary assent(s) of a certain strength. It is a state of mental (and therefore practical)

61. For an excellent analysis of self-deception by a Christian philosopher and theologian, see the (unpublished) doctoral dissertation on the subject by Greg L. Bahnsen (University of Southern California, Philosophy Department).

conflict. It is belief in the truth, dominated by belief in a lie. Therefore it is irrationality, foolishness, stupidity, to use language warranted by Scripture. Let us not seek to make Satan wiser than he is; he, too, is a fool.

And there is a further question. Is it legitimate to analyze faith in terms of assent, as long as we add comments about the strength of assent and about contrary assents? Clark's analysis does, as we have seen, do justice to the biblical conjunction of faith (knowledge) and obedience. We could, perhaps, also argue that he does justice to the element of friendship (knowledge of the person) that we have found to be so central. Although friendship is not reducible to factual knowledge, it is certainly true that one who wholeheartedly believes all the propositions of God's Word will be a friend of God. Assent, obedience, and friendship—you cannot have one without the others. Since each implies the others, any one of them could be used to define faith. So "assent" is adequate (with the qualifications made earlier), but it is neither the only possible analysis nor necessarily the best. The intellectualistic connotations of *assent*, which Clark rightly finds so valuable in combating the antitruth mentality of our day, also tend to mislead people into thinking that our relation with God is essentially theoretical or academic in character. The term, as Clark uses it, does not warrant such confusion, but it might cause it. And more seriously, Clark does not seem to recognize the fact that other perspectives (e.g., obedience, friendship) are at least equally adequate ways of characterizing faith. These are the concepts that are reflected in the term *fiducia*. Thus even if (as Clark says) faith is not something "more" than assent, at least it certainly has aspects other than the intellectual aspect suggested by *assent*. And we can see, then, why the Reformers felt the need for something "more."

i. His Knowledge Is "Intellectual" but Not "Ethical"

We move on to another possible analysis. Why shouldn't we simply say that the unbeliever can know God in an intellectual, but not in an ethical, sense? That is to say, he can know plenty of propositions about God, but he does not act on them, does not obey God. That is the sort of analysis favored by Reformed thinkers like John H. Gerstner[62] who seek to do justice to the doctrine of total depravity and at the same time to maintain that there is no fundamental difference between Christian and non-Christian reasoning. The difference, they would maintain, is ethical, not epistemological.

62. See R.C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and A. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

This position certainly evokes a biblical picture. Scripture often portrays unbelievers as those who know but fail to act properly on that knowledge (see Matt. 23:2f.; Luke 12:47f.; Rom. 1:18–21; 2 Thess. 1:8; James 2:19f.). But Scripture, as I understand it, does not permit such a sharp dichotomy between the ethical and the epistemological. Knowledge, as we have seen, is a part of life, and therefore must be achieved and maintained in a way that honors God. That is to say that there is an ethics of knowledge. There are right and wrong ways to think and learn. And if depravity is total, if it extends to all areas of life, then the unbeliever is one who *thinks* wrongly. And when people think wrongly, they come to wrong conclusions. Their thinking is foolish and stupid, to use biblical language. "Israel does not know," says God in exasperation (Isa. 1:3). Disobedience itself, we must say, is an ignorant, stupid response to God, and stupid even in an "intellectual" sense. If God is who He is and we are who we are, then it makes no sense at all to disobey. Renowned intellectual unbelievers are truly intelligent in the sense that they make extremely sophisticated and ingenious use of their mental powers, but they are stupid in that they reject the obvious.

Having said all that, I must agree with Gerstner that an unbeliever may know all sorts of true propositions about God. The trouble is, though, that as part of his disobedience he will also advocate many false propositions about God. In fact, he will advocate propositions that contradict the true propositions that he holds. In his mind there will be "conflicting assents" (cf. *h*, above). And the habits of thought that lead to this falsehood must be challenged head-on. The biblical picture is authentic. Unbelievers are people who "know but fail to act," and part of that "failure to act" is a failure to think as God requires.

j. My Formulation

So we come to the analysis that I consider the most adequate. Let's take it in several steps. (1) All unbelievers know enough truths about God to be without excuse and may know many more, as many as are available to man. There is no limit to the number of true, revealed propositions about God that an unbeliever can know. (2) But unbelievers lack the obedience and friendship with God that is essential to "knowledge" in the fullest biblical sense—the knowledge of the believer. Yet at every moment, they are personally involved with God as an enemy. Thus their knowledge of Him is more than merely propositional. (3) The unbeliever's disobedience has intellectual implications. First, it is itself a stupid response to God's revelation. (4) Second, disobedience is a kind of lying. When we disobey God, we testify to others

and to ourselves that God's Word is untrue.[63] (5) Third, disobedience involves fighting[64] the truth—fighting its dissemination, opposing its application to one's own life, to the lives of others, and to society. Sinners fight the truth in many ways. They (a) simply deny it (Gen. 3:4; John 5:38; Acts 19:9), (b) ignore it (2 Peter 3:5), (c) psychologically repress it, (d) acknowledge the truth with the lips but deny it in deed (Matt. 23:2f.), (e) put the truth into a misleading context (Gen. 3:5, 12, 13; Matt. 4:6), and (f) use the truth to oppose God. We should not fall into the trap of assuming that all sinners always use the same strategy. They do not always deny the truth in word or repress it into their subconscious. (6) Fourth, lying and fighting the truth involve affirmations of falsehoods. We must not assume that every sentence uttered by an unbeliever will be false; unbelievers can fight the truth in ways other than by uttering falsehoods. Yet disobedience always involves the acceptance of atheism, whether so stated in words or merely acted on in life (there is no significant difference between denying God's existence and acting as if God does not exist). (7) Fifth, these falsehoods may conflict with true beliefs that the sinner holds. At some level, every unbeliever holds conflicting beliefs, for example, God is Lord and God is not Lord. (8) Sixth, these falsehoods affect every area of life, including the epistemological. Thus the unbeliever has false notions even about how to reason—notions that may conflict with true notions that he also holds. (9) Seventh, the believer and the unbeliever differ epistemologically in that for the believer the truth is dominant over the lie, and for the unbeliever vice versa. It is not always clear which is dominant, which is to say that we do not have infallible knowledge of another's heart. (10) Finally, the unbeliever's goal is an impossible one—to destroy the truth entirely, to replace God with some alternative deity. Because the goal is impossible, the task is self-frustrating (see Ps. 5:10; Prov. 18:7; Jer. 2:19; Luke 19:22; Rom. 8:28; 9:15f.). The unbeliever is condemned out of his own mouth for he cannot help but affirm the truth that he opposes. And because the unbeliever's views are false, even his limited success is possible only because God allows it (see Job 1:12; Isa. 10:5–19). Adding to the fact that the unbeliever frustrates himself, God also frustrates him, restraining him from accomplishing his purposes (Gen. 11:7) and using him to accomplish God's

63. I take *katechon* in Romans 1:18 to mean "hindering," "holding back" (cf. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1960]). The *en* may be instrumental: "hindering the truth by his unrighteousness." The point is that disobedience itself is an attack on the truth. It is not only "intellectual" unbelievers who attack the truth of Christianity. "Practical" unbelievers do too, by living in disobedience. Their very disobedience is a lie, an assault on the truth.

64. I.e., "hindering."

purposes instead (Ps. 76:10; Isa. 45:1f.; Rom. 9:17). Thus the unbeliever's efforts accomplish good in spite of himself.

k. A Disclaimer

The last paragraph represents the most adequate view of the matter that I know of. Yet the question remains a very mysterious one. Scripture says that the unbeliever knows and that he does not know. Scripture does not give us an epistemological elucidation in as many terms; that elucidation must be drawn carefully out of what Scripture says about other matters. And much more work remains to be done before we will have a formulation that is credible to the church (even the Reformed churches) generally. Van Til is at his best in his *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (24–27) where he admits the difficulty of the questions (something he does not often do) and rests content with a description of the natural man as "a mixture of truth with error" (27). I will continue to assume the truth of the analysis under *j* above, but I would not advise anyone to be dogmatic about the details. Certainly they should not be used as tests of orthodoxy.

The Logic of Unbelief

Having surveyed the similarities and differences between believing and unbelieving knowledge of God, we shall now examine the general structure of unbelieving thought. What does the unbeliever believe? Well, obviously unbelievers differ among themselves about many things. But is there anything they all have in common? Yes, they all disbelieve! So we ask: What are the implications for knowledge of unbelief in the God of Scripture? Does that unbelief in and of itself impose any structure on a person's thoughts?

If the biblical God does not exist, there are two alternatives: either there is no god at all, or something other than the biblical God is god. On the one hand, if there is no god at all, then all is chance, all thinking is futile, and all ethical judgments are null and void. I shall therefore call that the irrationalist alternative. Irrationalism results not only when the existence of any god is denied but also when a god is affirmed and yet thought to be so distant or mysterious (or both) that he can have no practical involvement with the world. Irrationalism, parasitically, lives off of certain truths: that man is small, that the mind is limited, that God is far above us and incomprehensible. Thus irrationalism often enters theology masquerading as a respect for God's transcendence. We therefore described this position earlier as a "non-Christian view of transcendence."

On the other hand, if the unbeliever chooses to deify something in the world, something finite, then a kind of rationalism results. Man's mind either is the new god or is considered competent to discover it autonomously, which is the same thing. This is what we earlier described as a "non-Christian view of immanence," and it too masquerades as biblical truth, trading on biblical language about the covenant nearness of God, about His solidarity with the world.

Both rationalism and irrationalism are futile and self-defeating, as sin must always be. If irrationalism is true, then it is false. If all thinking is the product of chance, then how can it be trusted even to formulate an irrationalism? Rationalism flounders on the truth that is obvious to everyone: the human mind is not autonomous, not suited to be the final criterion of all truth. We are limited. The rationalist can defend his position, then, only by limiting his rationalism to certain truths of which he thinks there is no question—that we exist, that we think, and so forth. Then he seeks to deduce all other truth from those statements and to deny the truthfulness of anything that cannot be so deduced. But the result of this is that the mind turns out to know only itself or, more precisely, to know only its thinking. Thought is thought of thinking. Only that can be known for certain. Once some more specific content is specified, certainty disappears. Thus the consistent rationalist will deny that there is anything, ultimately, except "pure thought," "pure being," and so forth. All else is illusion (but how is that illusion to be explained!?). But what is a "pure thought" that is not a thought of something? Does that idea have any meaning at all? It is a pure blank. The knowledge of which rationalism boasts turns out to be a knowledge of . . . nothing!

Thus in the end, rationalism and irrationalism, so contrary to one another in mood and style, turn out to be identical. Rationalism gives us a perfect knowledge—of nothing. Irrationalism leaves us ignorant—of everything. Both are self-refuting for neither can give an intelligible account of itself. The irrationalist cannot consistently affirm his irrationalism. The rationalist, similarly, cannot affirm his rationalism; he can affirm only "pure thought," without specifying any content to it.

And so it is not surprising that rationalists and irrationalists borrow ideas from one another to avoid the destructive consequences of their own positions. The rationalist, when he seeks to get some content into his "pure being," resorts to irrationalism. The irrationalist can assert his irrationalism only on a rationalist basis—the basis of his own autonomy.

Thus these positions destroy themselves and one another, and yet they also need one another. They provide many tools for the Christian apologist,

and it is quite proper for the Christian apologist to confront the rationalist with his dependence on irrationalism, and vice versa and to show how each position is self-destructive. But of course, unless this destructiveness is replaced by the truth, our witness will be no help.