Common Grace and The Gospel

CORNELIUS VAN TIL

EDITED BY K. SCOTT OLIPHINT

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SECOND EDITION,

INCLUDING THE COMPLETE TEXT OF
THE ORIGINAL, 1972 EDITION

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FOREWORD
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When I first began reading Van Til's works, the only category I had for him was something like "Christian philosopher." The reason for that was that his terms, concepts, mode of argument, etc., were beyond any theology I had read in my nascent Christian experience. I was aware of such terminology and concepts only because of the philosophy classes I was then taking in college.

As I have come to appreciate over the years, however, the foundation for everything Van Til sets forth is his thoroughly biblical and Reformed theology. Part of the problem in understanding Van Til's writings is that, in his works, he was assuming that the rest of us would read him with that same theology in mind. If we do read him with an eye for his biblical and Reformed foundation, virtually every term, concept, mode of argument, etc., will find its home in that foundation. This is unquestionably the case in this volume.

As Van Til notes in the beginning, this book is a collection of essays. These essays were written over a period of roughly twenty-five years. Given the different time and context of each of the essays, we can expect that there will be differing emphases in them as well. But even with differing emphases, there is similarity of content and concepts in them all.

My comments throughout this volume attempt to clarify and explain Van Til's arguments, so we need not detail those here. An initial, general point is in order, however, and then we will discuss three overriding themes that are found throughout this work and that should guide our reading through each essay.

First, the more general comment. Throughout this collection of essays, Van Til wants to provide a "third way" to think about "the common grace problem": "Going off to the right by denying common grace [as with Hoeksema] or going off to the left by affirming a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome [as in some of Kuyper's formulations] is to fail, to this extent, to challenge the wisdom of the world" (p. 168).

The "third way" that Van Til proposes is a way that goes neither to the left nor to the right. Unwilling to move "to the right," Van Til will not deny common grace. Such a denial, as he will make clear, is unbiblical, and it presupposes an improper application of the rules of thinking. Those who deny common grace think "abstractly" and "deductively," so that certain truths of Scripture are squeezed out because they cannot fit within the constraints of abstract reasoning.

The primary point to keep in mind, therefore, with respect to the *rejection* of the doctrine of common grace (a rejection that Van Til opposes), is that it is based on a *fallacious logical deduction* from the truth of God's eternal decree, a decree both to elect a people and to pass over others. Such deductions deal with "abstractions" and thus fail to be biblically concrete.[1] Not only so, but they undermine a biblical philosophy of history. It is this practice of drawing fallacious deductions that Van Til is concerned to address, and he addresses it with deep biblical content in each of these essays (though his terms may not, on the surface, betray that content).

So Van Til cannot move to the right. Neither, however, will his "third way" move "to the left"; it will not allow for a notion of neutral concepts or activities (as in the "theology of Rome") in which there can be no Christian challenge because there is thought to be, in such concepts or activities, no real rebellion against God. There can be no view of common grace in which the Christian and the non-Christian, it is supposed, have certain concepts and ideas that are, at root, in common. This kind of commonality can be no part of common grace, according to Van Til, because, in part, if such commonality existed, there could be no challenge to the non-Christian in those areas of his life and thinking. More importantly, such thinking does not give due credit to the biblical and Reformed notion of the antithesis between believer and unbeliever.

1. In the preface, Van Til summarizes for us "the point of view that binds the several chapters of this book together." The "point of view" of which Van Til speaks is that, due to the Christian notion of a "limiting concept," "there is an intelligible, though not an exhaustive, intellectually penetrable basis for human experience" (p. xlix).

Because Van Til will not move to the right or to the left in his articulation of the doctrine of common grace, some revision is necessary. That revision focuses on three fundamental and interconnected themes that are central to Van Til's doctrine of common grace. Thus, it is crucial to understand these themes and to recognize their presence throughout this book.

There are myriad theological and philosophical issues that these essays on common grace touch upon; all of them could be pursued with profit and edification. However, in light of Van Til's assessment of that which binds these essays together, and in order to provide a more general overview of them, I want to highlight three main and overriding themes that are more or less assumed in each chapter in this work and that provide an interpretive grid through which to read them all. These themes are not necessarily terms that Van Til repeats often, nor are they the only themes that could have been chosen; rather, they are dominant concepts that help us understand the substance of Van Til's arguments and his development of the doctrine of common grace throughout each essay. Using Van Til's own language, then, these three themes are: (1) **fearless anthropomorphism**, (2) **concrete thinking**, and (3) **limiting concepts**.

Although these three themes may sound a bit abstract, they should be seen, as I hope to show, as terms that invariably point us to the biblical truths of the Reformed faith. Not only so, but these three interrelated themes are best seen as entailing each other. That is, we are not being fearlessly anthropomorphic unless we are thinking concretely and articulating our theological doctrines (with respect to these issues) as limiting concepts. These themes are not enumerated here in the order of their appearance in the essays, nor are they chosen because of the number of times they appear in this collection of essays. Rather, they seem to me to be the central, controlling themes for everything Van Til wants to emphasize about common grace and its related theological concepts. Indeed, in some ways they are central to everything Van Til wrote. That should not be surprising, given that these essays span so much of his teaching career.

Before we set out to explain these three themes, it is crucial to remember where, theologically, Van Til begins his thinking about common grace—and about everything else. He begins with the ontological Trinity. To "**begin with**" the ontological Trinity means, at least, that the reality of God *as God* must be the assumption and controlling reality behind everything else that is said. Specifically, as we will note below, the three themes themselves are what they are only in light of the fact that the triune God is absolutely independent, in and of himself. That is, he is *essentially* independent;

there is no sense in which God needs anything in order to be who he is, in and of himself. This truth begins to inform the mystery that is part and parcel of the three themes below. Apart from this truth, there is little to no mystery in the Christian faith. Not only so, but apart from this truth, God is in some essential way in need of something outside of himself in order to be who he is as God. That cannot be the case. The Bible begins with the ontological Trinity in its first four words. Since only God *was* in the beginning, he cannot need anything in order to be who he is.

Not only so, but because the God who alone is independent is triune, the oneness of God that we confess as Christians must be affirmed in its triune diversity as well. That is, God is three in one, not simply one. His three-in-oneness is the foundation for the interplay in creation of the one (universal categories) and the many (particular things). The triunity of God is indeed a mystery, and that mystery has its analog in all of creation as his creatures recognize both unity and diversity in the world God has made. Creation, then, is mysteriously analogous to the triune God's character. In this way, Van Til takes seriously, and rigorously applies, Herman Bavinck's dictum that the lifeblood of theology is mystery.[2]

It is only in the context of God's triune aseity (that is, his absolute self-existence and independence, in and of himself), which is the bedrock foundation for everything Van Til argues in this work (and in all of his works), that the three themes below take their proper place.

(1) FEARLESS ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Van Til does not use the phrase *fearless anthropomorphism* that often in these essays, but everything that he says about common grace, including its relationship to God's decree and to our total depravity, as well as the knotty problems surrounding God's will of decree and his will of command, includes and presupposes this idea.

The Reformed faith holds that the relation between God's will of decree and his will of command cannot be exhaustively understood by man. Any relation between what God does in eternity and what he does in history is clothed in mystery. That is, God decrees and controls whatsoever comes to pass. Embedded in that sovereign, unconditional, and all-encompassing decree, however, are God's commands, which may or may not be fol-

2. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:29.

lowed. How can both things be compatible? How can it be that God decrees *all things*, and at the same time sets forth his commands, which can be transgressed? How do these two "wills" cohere? The answer to this question highlights the mystery through which biblical truth flows. As Van Til develops his notion of common grace (and as he interacts with William Masselink), there are contrasts and comparisons made between "Amsterdam" and "Old Princeton." So, says Van Til:

> Amsterdam and Old Princeton agree that the relation between the will of decree and will of command cannot be exhaustively understood by man. Therefore every point of doctrine is a "difficult problem." As men we must think analogically. God is the original and man is derivative. We must not determine what can or cannot be by argument that starts from the will of decree apart from its relation to the will of command. In particular we must not say that God cannot display any attitude of favor to the generality of mankind because we know that He intends that ultimately some are "vessels of wrath." On the other hand we must not argue from the revealed will of God with respect to man's responsibility to the denial of man's ultimate determination by the will of decree. We need therefore at this point, *which is all-inclusive*, to be "fearlessly anthropomorphic." (p. 215, emphasis added)

As we noted above, the first thing that must be understood in any discussion of common grace is the *mystery* that obtains by virtue of God's character and his relationship to creation. To put it simply, there is no mystery when there is no creation. God exhaustively knows himself and all things. Mystery ensues (for the Reformed) at the point of creation, specifically, the creation of man (male and female). When God created man, he determined to create man in his image. That determination included the fact that man would be responsible for and in history, due to his covenant relationship to God. Man would make choices, and those choices would influence, for better or for worse, the flow of history and his relationship to God. Indeed, those choices would influence God's attitude toward man. God would, in a *real but penultimate* sense, *react* according to man's choices.[3]

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3. This "reaction" of God, in a Reformed context, presupposes his exhaustive, unconditional decree. In a semi-Pelagian or Arminian context, God's reaction presupposes man's autonomy; not so for the Reformed.

Not only so, but as God chose to make man in his image, he also determined that Adam would be the covenant head of all mankind. As such, Adam was the representative of every person who would ever exist. Thus, Adam's choices were not just his, but also, by virtue of his representation, all of ours.[4]

None of this, however, can be understood as denying, subverting, undermining, or eliminating in any way the fact of God's unconditional and eternal decree, by which he determines and exhaustively controls "whatsoever comes to pass." God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11), and there is nothing on which God depends in order to determine and carry out his sovereign plan.[5] That plan ultimately and immutably determines every detail of history and of eternity.

To reiterate our point above, when Van Til encourages *fearless anthropomorphism*, he is not using that phrase in a vacuum. The notion itself, as he reminds us, must be understood within the context of a Reformed doctrine of God and of his covenant with man: **"A fearless anthropomorphism based on the doctrine of the ontological trinity, rather than abstract reasoning on the basis of a metaphysical and epistemological correlativism, should control our concepts all along the line"** (p. 111).

The "fearless anthropomorphism" of which Van Til speaks has its foundation in the ontological Trinity. In other words, we can be properly anthropomorphic only if we first understand the aseity of the triune God. That is, our notion of the ontological Trinity must include the fact that God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is altogether independent, in and of himself; he is not in need of anything. Before there was creation, there was the triune God, and he was not constrained by time, by space, or by anything at all in order to be, eternally and immutably, who he is.

This truth is monumentally important to grasp, and it is the central focus of anything else that we say or believe, about common grace or anything else, as Reformed Christians. It is this view of God that distinguishes Reformed Christianity from Arminianism. Roger Olson, in his book on Arminian theology says as much:

> *Contrary to popular belief, then*, the true divide at the heart of the
> Calvinist-Arminian split is not predestination versus free will but the

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4. For an exegetical analysis of Adam's covenant headship and its implications for us, see John Murray, "The Imputation of Adam's Sin," in *Justified in Christ*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2007).

5. It is worth noting Psalm 50 at this point. God comes to judge his people because they have denied his Word, and have convinced themselves that God is in need of them and their sacrifices. God reserves strong language of judgment for such sins.

guiding picture of God: *he is primarily viewed as either (1) majestic, powerful, and controlling or (2) loving good, and merciful. Once the picture . . . is established, seemingly contrary aspects fade into the background, are set aside as "obscure" or are artificially made to fit the system.*[6]

The difficulty with Olson's assessment is that he sets up a false dichotomy, a disjunction between God's majesty *or* his mercy, for example, which the notion of fearless anthropomorphism is well suited to address. Thus, as will become evident in some of these essays, a Reformed notion of fearless anthropomorphism shows the invalidity of Arminian assessments, such as Olson's. Before elaborating on what a fearless anthropomorphism is, however, we need to acknowledge why Olson might (to some extent, rightly) make this assessment of the "Calvinist" picture of God.

In a right and proper zeal to uphold the sovereign majesty of the triune God, many Reformed (or Augustinian) theologians have not, at the same time, been intent on being fearlessly anthropomorphic. The perhaps unintended result has been a view of God that is much too abstract (thus, *unbiblical*, according to Van Til) and aloof, too far removed from man and his world to interact, really and truly, with us in time. A few examples of this tendency might be instructive; many more could be provided. For example, at the beginning of his work on the Trinity, Augustine says this: "[Scripture] has borrowed many things from the spiritual creature, whereby to signify *that which indeed is not so*, but must needs so be said: as, for instance, 'I the Lord thy God am a jealous God;' (Ex. 20:5) [see also Ex. 34:14; Deut. 4:24, 5:9, 6:15; Josh. 24:19; Ez. 36:6; Nah. 1:2] 'It repenteth me that I have made man,' (Gen. 6:7)."[7]

We need to think carefully about what is said here. Is it proper and biblically warranted to say that what Scripture says is "*not so*, but must needs so be said"? Do we really want to affirm that Scripture teaches that which is *really not so*, or not in conformity with the way things *really* are, or not the case, after all? Would this way of thinking not lean toward a wrong view of Scripture? If we think in the way Augustine encourages, can we consistently take Scripture seriously when it speaks about God?

6. Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 73 (emphasis added).
7. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1873), I.1.2 (emphasis added).

How, for example, might one go about preaching, to use Augustine's example, Exodus 20:5? Would the minister stand up before his congregation and say, " 'Thus saith the Lord, 'I the LORD your God am a jealous God.' Brothers and sisters in Christ, Scripture must needs speak this way, but it is not so. The Lord is not a jealous God. He is simply borrowing something from the creature." Surely, a minister who uttered such things would have his credentials rightly called into question.

Thomas Aquinas, whose doctrine of God can, in places, be consistent with that which was emphasized at the time of the Reformation, nevertheless stumbled as his mentor, Augustine, had done.[8] So, he says:

> Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him. *Thus there is nothing to prevent these names which import relation to the creature from being predicated of God temporally, not by reason of any change in Him, but by reason of the change of the creature; as a column is on the right of an animal, without change in itself, but by change in the animal.*[9]

Without detailing the medieval notion of a "real relation" (which notion is more complicated than it appears on the surface), we can see that in the illustration Thomas gives we have the central focus of his assertion. The relationship that creatures have to God, and God to us, is analogous to the relationship that a column has to an animal. The column is on the right of the animal because of movement or change in the animal, not by virtue of any change in the column. In other words, because God is immutable (which he is), his relationship to creatures, according to Thomas, needs qualification such that the creature is "really" related to God, but not God to the creature; the latter relationship can only be "ideal."

The question asked above can be broached here as well. What might we think of a preacher who stands before his congregation and says, "Dear

8. My own conviction is that, since Aquinas, too many have adopted his ideas and language uncritically, especially with respect to his doctrine of God, and thus have had no clear and cogent way to affirm much, if not most, of what Scripture says about God and his dealings with, and activity in, creation.

9. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (London: Burns, Oates, and Washburne, 1920–1942), 1.13.7 (emphasis added). Available online at home.newadvent.org/summa/1013.html.

friends, we know that God is not really, but only *ideally*, related to us. But fear not, we are *really* related to him." This view, too, is plagued with abstraction, and fails to be fearlessly anthropomorphic.

Abstract and misleading views like this could be multiplied. Here is how Paul Helm describes what he takes to be Calvin's view of a similar matter. In discussing the atonement and its relationship to God's disposition toward us, Helm notes:

> So the truth about atonement, about reconciliation to God, has to be represented to us as if it implied a change in God, and so an inconsistency, an apparent contradiction, in his actions towards us. But in fact there is no change in God; he loves us from eternity. There is however, a change in us, a change that occurs as by faith Christ's work is appropriated. *The change is not from wrath to grace, but from our belief that we are under wrath to our belief that we are under grace.*[10]

Calvin's view, according to Helm, is that we move from wrath to grace merely in what we believe about our standing with God, since there can be no change in God. That is, we move from *our belief* that we are under wrath to *our belief* that we are under grace, but those beliefs do not comport with the way things *really* are.

Imagine, then, a preacher preaching on Ephesians 2:1–8: "Yes, says Paul, you were children of wrath. And yes, dear friends, God has, by grace, made you alive in Christ. But surely you must recognize that, if you are one of God's elect, you were not *really* under God's wrath. What Scripture is teaching you here is not the way things *really* are with respect to God; it is teaching you what you must *believe*. And, in spite of the way things *really* are, you must *believe* that, if you are in Christ, you have moved from wrath to grace. But, make no mistake, you *really* have not. Since God cannot change, his disposition toward you has not *really* changed; only your beliefs have changed. And those beliefs, which Scripture itself encourages, were not true to the way God *really* is toward you." How long might such a preacher last in a theologically orthodox church? Any congregation, session, or presbytery worth its salt would see to it that this preacher found another calling.

Two more examples should suffice. Stephen Charnock seems to have taken the bad with the good from Aquinas in his explanation of God's

10. Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 395.

disposition toward us: "God is not changed, when of loving to any creatures he becomes angry with them, or of angry he becomes appeased. The change in these cases is in the creatures; according to the alteration in the creature, it stands in a various relation to God."[11]

So, at the risk of repetition, when Scripture says that God is angry with us, does it *really* mean that the change is "in the creatures"? This strains the clear meaning of language beyond recognition.

Lastly, it seems even Bavinck was reluctant to be fearlessly anthropomorphic with respect to his understanding of God: "We can almost never tell why God willed one thing rather than another, and are therefore compelled to believe that he could just as well have willed one thing as another. *But in God there is actually no such thing as choice inasmuch as it always presupposes uncertainty, doubt, and deliberation*."[12]

This point, too, utterly skews the clear teaching of Scripture. Are we meant to think that when Scripture says that God chose us before the foundation of the world, what it really means is that there was no such choice? Or, to use another example, is it the case, as Bavinck (and others) goes on to say, that God's willing of himself is *identical* to his willing of his creatures?[13] How can we make sense of such an idea, biblically speaking? It will not do simply to appeal to "mystery" here, since the biblical view of mystery does in no way include a denial of what Scripture clearly teaches.

These select quotations get to the heart of Van Til's concern in this volume. How, exactly, are we to think about the "apparent contradictions" that face us in Scripture, especially as they relate to God's character and to his general grace to all mankind? Concerning the examples above, we must ask why we have these aberrations with respect to the doctrine of God from solid, orthodox, and brilliant theologians. The reason, at least in part, is that, in each of the examples cited, these theologians were not fearlessly anthropomorphic. They rightly affirm God's aseity and the attributes that follow from his aseity (e.g., his eternity, infinity, and immutability). They are right to hold to these, and to resist any temptation to let them go. But then they begin systematically and "**abstractly**" (as Van Til would say) to make logical deductions from the principle, say, of aseity, without being controlled, first of all, by the data of Scripture. And this becomes their downfall as they begin to express things about God that are not the case.

11. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 1:345.
12. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:239–40 (emphasis added).
13. Ibid., 2:240.

To deduce from God's aseity or simplicity that he does not make choices, or that his will to create is identical to his willing of himself, or that he does not really relate to us, is to prefer abstract (unbiblical) deduction over clear biblical teaching. Because the doctrine of common grace entails the mystery of God's dealings with man, this is, in part, the burden of Van Til's discussion throughout this collection of essays: "Applying this to the case in hand, we would say that we are entitled and compelled to use anthropomorphism not apologetically but fearlessly. *We need not fear to say that God's attitude has changed with respect to mankind.* We know well enough that God in himself is changeless" (p. 89, emphasis added). Van Til affirms biblical truth, and does so in the context of what Scripture has to say, rather than as a deduction from (what turns out to be) an abstract principle.

It may help us at this point to advance beyond the details of Van Til's insistence on fearless anthropomorphism and to suggest how one can affirm, as Van Til does, *both* that "God's attitude has changed with respect to mankind" *and* that "God in himself is changeless." A proper assessment of this dilemma could occupy us for some time, but we can at least provide here the basic structure within which an answer can be given.[14]

How, then, does God remain altogether independent and immutable, while also interacting meaningfully with creation and with us? The one-word answer to the question is, "Covenant." When it comes to the subject of God's covenant with man, the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 7, section 1, says:

> The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

What the Confession asserts in this section has massive and profound implications, first for theology proper, and then for our understanding of God's activity in history (and the order of these is crucial), including

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14. For an extended, book-length answer to this question, see K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012). What follows below is *not* attributable to Van Til, but flows inexorably from the emphases that are present in this volume and elsewhere in his writings.

the doctrine of common grace. This confessional statement deserves the meditative attention of every serious Christian. To understand covenant, there are two things worth noting in this majestic section:

(1) In a chapter that summarizes God's covenant with man, the first thing that the Confession expresses is the infinite distance between God and man. But just what is this distance? Surely the notion of "distance" must be a metaphor, since in reality there never was, nor will there ever be, a spatial distance between God and man. God is present, fully and completely, in all places and at all times, into eternity, both in the new heaven and new earth and in hell. So the distance cannot be a spatial distance.

This "distance" focuses on the *being* of God in comparison to the *being* of his creatures. That is, it is an *ontological* distance. God is, as the Confession has already affirmed, "infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible" (2.1). As infinite in being, and as immutable, immense, and eternal, God is wholly other; he is beyond anything that mere creatures can think or experience. We cannot conceive of what God's infinity is; our minds cannot grasp or contain what God's eternity is. He is not limited by anything—not by space and not by time. So, there is a distance, a separation of being, between God and his creatures. God, and he alone, is independent (*a se*).[15] Everything else is dependent on him.

This is no philosophical idea or mere human speculation. It is rather a necessary implication of the first words of the Bible: "In the beginning, God . . ." These words affirm that at the beginning of creation (including the creation of time), God *was*. Given that truth, we confess that God alone is independent; what could God have needed when there was nothing existing but him alone? He existed before creation, and nothing else did. His existence was not dependent on anyone or anything else; it *could not* be dependent, since there was nothing in existence but the triune God. Before there was creation, there was only God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There was no time, and there was no space; there was no "when" of God's existence, and there was no "where." There was only the triune God. He and he alone existed; he did not exist at a time or in a place. He simply *was*.

It is incumbent on the Christian to recognize this before, and in the context of, thinking about God's covenant relationship to creation. This

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15. To see what the Westminster Assembly had in mind in WCF 7.1, note that added Scripture references at the end of this section (Isa. 40:13–17, Job 9:32–33, 1 Sam. 2:25, Ps. 113:5–6, Ps. 100:2–3, Job 22:2–3, Job 35:7–8, Luke 17:10, Acts 17:24–25, cited in the order given in this section) refer exclusively to this "distance" of God and the impossibility of our "fruition" of him.

is why the Confession begins where it does. The problem with any theology that will not confess the absolute independence and sovereignty of God is that it does not adequately account for God's majestic character, including his existence and independence prior to his act of creation. A theology that begins with "God-in-relationship" is a theology that will inevitably veer from the truth of Scripture and from a true confession of God's character, as well as of his covenant with man.

(2) It is worth noting, then, and it is a masterstroke of theological genius, that the Confession begins its section on covenant, as it must, with the majestic and incomprehensible character of God. This must be the starting place for all thinking about God and his relationship to creation. Any theology that goes wrong in its assessment of God inevitably goes wrong because it begins its theologizing with "God-in-relationship" rather than with the independent and immutable triune God. This is why, in the quotation from Olson above, there is such a vast difference between the Reformed and Arminian notions of God. The Arminian begins his thinking about God in terms of God-in-relationship; there is, therefore, an inevitable and essential dependence of God on his creation. God, for the Arminian, is one who can determine man's destiny only according to man's own independent choice, not God's.

The Westminster Confession is clear and explicit about God's essential independence in chapter 2 ("Of God, and of the Holy Trinity"). Now one might have thought that since the Confession already affirmed God's aseity in chapter 2, there would be no need to introduce such things again in chapter 7. But the genius of chapter 7 is that it was recognized that unless this distance between God and his creatures be first affirmed, any notion of covenant could be seen to be anemic, because it would be tied to a dependent God, as is the Arminian notion of God.

Once we recognize the ontological distance between God and creatures, which includes the fact, as section 1 says, that even though we owe obedience to him, we could have no "fruition of him as [our] blessedness and reward," we are then in a position to affirm just what it is that brought about God's relationship to his creatures.

Here is where we can begin to understand why and how we are to be fearlessly anthropomorphic. Two monumentally pregnant words—"voluntary condescension"—in this first section of chapter 7 affirm the initiation of God's relationship to his creatures, and we need to focus briefly on each of those words.

What does the Confession mean by "voluntary" with respect to God? In theology proper, we make a distinction between God's necessary

knowledge and will and his free knowledge and will. This distinction is not tangential to our understanding of God; it is crucial to a proper grasp of his incomprehensible character. Given these two categories, it is perhaps more obvious that God's knowledge and will are necessary. As one who cannot but exist, and who is independent, God knows all things, just by virtue of who he is, and whatever he wills *with respect to himself* is, like him, necessary. Why, then, do we need to confess that God's knowledge and will are, with respect to some things, free?

We confess this, in part, because the contrary is impossible, given who God is. Since he is independent and in need of nothing, there was no necessity that he create anything at all. If creation were necessary, then God would be dependent on it in order to be who he is. But (contrary to Arminians, Molinists, Barthians, et al.) there is no such essential dependence in God. So, God's determination to create, and to relate to that creation, is a *free* decision. Two things are important to keep in mind about God's free knowledge and will.

First, the free knowledge and will of God have their focus in what God *determines*. That which God determines is surely something that he knows (for how could God determine that which was unknown, and what, for God, *could be* unknown?). That which God knows and determines is that which he carries out. In other words, to put it simply, there is no free knowledge of God that is not also a free determination (or act of will) of God. The two are inextricably linked.

God's knowledge is a *directing* knowledge; it has an object in view. His will enjoins some of that which he knows, and his power executes that which his will enjoins. What God freely knows is what he freely wills. We can see now that with the notion of "voluntary condescension" we have moved from a discussion of God's essential nature, involving his ontological distance from his creation, to an affirmation of his free determination to create *and to condescend*. This is something that God did not have to do; so, we move from a discussion of God's essential nature to a discussion of his free activity and those things that follow from that activity.

Second (and significant in our discussion of common grace), the free will of God is tied to his eternal decree. This is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it reminds us that God's free will does not simply and only coincide with his activity in and through creation, but is active prior to creation. So God's free will includes his activity in and through creation, but is not limited to that activity. God's free determination is an activity of the triune God, even before the foundation of

the world. Once he determined "whatsoever comes to pass," he freely bound himself (covenantally) to his creation for eternity.

So the initiation of the relationship of God to his creatures was a "voluntary" initiation. It was a free determination of God, and it was a free determination that took place "before the foundation of the world," that is, in eternity. This free determination included an agreement between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, an agreement sometimes called the *pactum salutis*, or covenant of salvation. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit agreed, before the foundation of the world, to create and to redeem a people. They committed themselves to a certain relationship in, with, and for creation. This in itself was a free decision; it was "voluntary," and it was a decision of "condescension." But what does the word *condescension* mean in this context?

The word itself means "a coming down," and, like the word *distance*, is a spatial metaphor. As with the word *distance*, *condescension* is used metaphorically to communicate something that is much deeper and more glorious than might initially be realized. Just as there is no spatial distance between God and his creatures, so also can there be no "coming down" or "condescension" of God such that he begins to occupy a space that he did not otherwise occupy. In other words, because God is present everywhere, there is no place where he is not, and thus no place that he begins to occupy by coming down. He always and everywhere occupies all places, fully and completely.

So what does *condescension* mean? The best way to begin to grasp this glorious and gracious truth is to look to that supreme and ultimate example of condescension in Holy Scripture—the incarnation of the Son of God. In the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity "came down" in order to be *with us*, so that he might live an obedient life and die an obedient death on behalf of his people, rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven to reign. What did this condescension entail for him?

It did not mean that he began to occupy a place that he did not otherwise occupy. As the Son of God, thus fully and completely God, he was, is, and remains omnipresent. What it means is that the Son took on a human nature so that he might fulfill the plan of redemption that was decreed by him, together with the Father and the Spirit, before the foundation of the world. He took on, in other words, characteristics, properties, and attributes—call them *covenantal* characteristics—in order that he might relate to us in a way that he did not otherwise. His condescension was his taking on of a human nature in order properly, according to what the

triune God had decreed, to relate to creation generally and to his people more specifically.

When the Confession affirms God's voluntary condescension, then, this is, in the main, what is meant. It means that God took on characteristics, properties, and attributes that he did not have to take on (remember this condescension was voluntary) in order that he might relate, even *bind himself*, to the creation and to his creatures. His commitment to that which is other than himself—his creation—included, by definition, a condescension. He freely bound himself to his creation, including his creatures, such that there would, from that point into eternity, be characteristics, attributes, and properties that he would take on, all by the sheer freedom of his will. These characteristics are such that God (the Son) could walk in the garden with Adam and Eve, meet and negotiate with Abraham concerning Sodom, meet with Moses on Mount Horeb and in the Tent of Meeting, wrestle with Jacob, confront and rebuke Joshua as the divine warrior, etc.—and, preeminently and climactically, come to save a people for himself.[16]

Perhaps we can now begin to see that to be "**fearlessly anthropomorphic**" is to recognize that God is able *both* to be infinite, eternal, unchangeable, etc., *and* to be angry, be gracious, love a people, hate the reprobate, be jealous, etc. Olson's false disjunction above can now be seen to have its resolution in a biblical view of covenant, a view in which God freely determines to condescend. Not only so, but Augustine's "it is not so," Helm's "no transition from wrath to grace," and Thomas's only "ideal relationship" of God to creation need not be affirmed. Rather, God's voluntary condescension requires that we affirm him to be both independent and in relationship to his creation—both immutable and able to move from a disposition of wrath toward us to a disposition of grace. By God condescending, eternity and time are united (as they are in Christ) without in any way separating, denying, or confusing one side or the other.

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16. Given the influence of Geerhardus Vos on Van Til (on which, see below), it is worth noting here, with respect to God's condescension, that Vos calls it a "sacramental" condescension. Throughout redemptive history, sacramental condescensions on God's part include his appearing in human/visible form. Behind this visible form is the impression that God is altogether invisible. "Behind the Angel speaking as God, and who embodied in Himself all the condescension of God to meet the frailty and limitations of man, there existed at the same time another aspect of God, in which he could not be seen and materially received after such a fashion, the very God of whom the Angel spoke in the third person. . . . In the incarnation of our Lord we have the supreme expression of this fundamental arrangement." Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; reset, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 74.

But there is a priority in our understanding of this great mystery. As the Confession makes clear in the first section of chapter 7, we must first recognize the infinite distance that there is between God and his creatures. In beginning with that ontological distance, we note that in God's character there is a priority to who he is quite apart from creation. That is, whatever else we affirm about God, we cannot in any way imply that his being-in-relation is symmetrical to his being-in-himself. The latter is necessary and could not be otherwise; God is who he is. The former, on the other hand, is free, and did not have to be at all.

Our fearlessly anthropomorphic understanding of God, therefore, has behind it the clear teaching of Scripture and also the free determination of God to commit himself to creation, and in that commitment to relate to us *really and truly* (not *ideally*). Such relationships, however, require no change in his essential character (since, by definition, that nature cannot change).

This, after all, is what God has done, and who he is, supremely in Christ. Van Til has this in mind as well. Just after encouraging us to be fearlessly anthropomorphic, he says: "**The Council of Chalcedon excluded logical deductions based on anything short of a combination of all the factors of revelation with respect to the God-man. So in the problem of common grace we must not argue for differences without qualification or for identities without qualification**" (p. 216).

In other words, that which points us clearly to fearless anthropomorphism is the biblical content contained in the Chalcedonian Creed. That creed affirmed that the person of the Son of God, who is, in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, is to be "acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly (ἀσυγχύτως), unchangeably (ἀρέπτως), indivisibly (ἀδιαιρέτως), and inseparably (ἀχωρίστως)." The two natures of Christ are not confused, changed, divided, or separated. Of course, the human nature is his only by virtue of the free determination of the triune God to save a people; the divine nature is his of necessity. But once he takes on that human nature, there must be no confusion, change, division, or separation of the two natures. We can affirm, then, that Christ is, as God, infinite, eternal, unchangeable, etc. But we can also "**fearlessly**" affirm that he was located in time and space, that he grew tired and hungry, that he grew in wisdom and in favor with God, etc. To deny one of those natures for the sake of the other is to do an injustice to the truth of Scripture, to deny the means of the salvation of men, and to detract from the inexhaustible glory of God!

So it is with God in history.[17] He came down (see, for example, Ex. 3:8), and in that condescension he did not cease to be God, for he cannot deny himself. But he did take on, really and truly, those characteristics that he deemed requisite for the carrying out of his eternal plan in history.[18]

It is this covenantal condescension that Van Til has in mind when he reminds us, throughout this collection of essays, that it is not possible for us to reason deductively about God's relationship to creation, generally, or about the relationship of God's decree to his common grace, more specifically. As we noted in the quote, above, from Van Til:

> We must not say that God cannot display any attitude of favor to the generality of mankind because we know that He intends that ultimately some are "vessels of wrath." On the other hand we must not argue from the revealed will of God with respect to man's responsibility to the denial of man's ultimate determination by the will of decree. We need therefore at this point, which is all-inclusive, to be "fearlessly anthropomorphic." (p. 215)

The reason we cannot work through a process of deduction from either of these two wills of God is that they refer both to God in eternity (will of decree) and to God's acts in history (will of command); in other words, they are both covenantally qualified. They presuppose that God is who he is, and that he has covenanted with his creatures. As Van Til makes clear in his first essay:

> But then, to say this is not to say that the "solution" offered on these questions is a "systematic" one, in the sense that it is logically penetrable by the intellect of man. The biblical "system of truth" is not a "deductive system." The various teachings of Scripture are not related to one another in the way

17. The controlling emphasis of the entirety of Van Til's discussion on common grace is his emphasis on covenant *history*. Though we do not have the space to pursue it here, it should be obvious to the reader that the influence of Geerhardus Vos, one of Van Til's most revered mentors and friends, is on every page of this volume. Much of Van Til's work has Vos's imprint on it.

18. Speaking of the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, Vos notes: "The form in which the Angel appeared was a form *assumed* for the moment, laid aside again as soon as the purpose of its assumption had been served." Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*, 75. This temporary "assumption" in the Old Testament looks forward to the permanent assumption, "when the time had fully come," of a human nature by this same Angel of the Lord.

that syllogisms of a series are related. The "system of truth" of Scripture presupposes the existence of the internally, eternally, self-coherent, triune God who reveals Himself to man with unqualified authority. (p. xlviii)

So, it is illegitimate, biblically and theologically, to reason from the truth of God's eternal decree to a denial of a favorable attitude of God toward the reprobate in history. It is just as illegitimate to argue from God's mercy and grace toward all mankind that there could be no particular, sovereign election in eternity.

In sum, to be "fearlessly anthropomorphic" is to say that the God who can bring together two distinct natures—the divine and the human—in one person without confusing, changing, dividing, or separating each nature can surely bring together the "nature" of the eternal (decree) and the "nature" of the historical without violating any of the essential characteristics of each one. In the case of the incarnation, and of all of God's dealings in history, we cannot figure out *how* such things can be; but *that* they are and can be is without question, and it is the substance of our relationship to the God who made us and is redeeming a people for himself.

Only by being fearlessly anthropomorphic, therefore, are we able to reason *concretely* rather than abstractly, which brings us to our second point.

(2) CONCRETE THINKING

Since the next two themes follow from the first, much of the conceptual arsenal needed to explain this theme (and the next) is already contained in the first theme. It will be necessary to keep the first theme in mind as we think together about the second and third. Keep the notion of fearless anthropomorphism in mind, then, as we discuss the two remaining controlling ideas in Van Til's overall analysis of common grace.

The first thing we need to say is a reiteration of a point made earlier, but which must be repeated due to its almost total neglect in other analyses of Van Til. When Van Til urges "concrete thinking," he is, in effect, urging *biblical* thinking; conversely, abstract thinking is thinking that is inconsistent with the emphases and teaching of Scripture.[19] And Scripture,

19. The biblical impetus behind Van Til's notion of concrete thinking can best be seen, in the present volume, in the section entitled, "The Positive Line of Concrete Thinking" (pp. 79–113).

we should remember, is fearlessly anthropomorphic. So, says Van Til: "To think analogically, to be *fearlessly anthropomorphic*, is to think *concretely*, for it is to take all the factors of revelation into consideration simultaneously" (p. 216, emphasis added).

Implied in a method that takes revelation as epistemologically foundational is a proper view of thinking. So, the first general principle with respect to Van Til's emphasis on "concrete thinking" is that it requires a proper *view* and *use* of the laws of thought. In his critique of Herman Hoeksema's denial of common grace, Van Til says:

> It may perhaps be said that much of the abstract reasoning of Hoeksema comes from his failure to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian logic. We do not mean, of course, that the rules of the syllogism are different for Christians and non-Christians. . . . But when he says or assumes that God's revelation in Scripture may be expected to reveal nothing which will be apparently self-contradictory, we demur. (p. 36)

What Van Til says here is significant theologically (which means it is significant apologetically as well), in that it will enable us to think biblically about common grace. With respect to the fundamental and basic truths of Scripture, we must affirm that our beliefs are not able adequately to be reconciled with, or subsumed under, our typical patterns and laws of thinking. That is to say, our laws of thought must be used to *serve*, rather than to *determine*, how we think, especially how we think about Christian truth.

This is the case, as noted above, in one of the church's earliest creeds—the Chalcedonian Creed (451 A.D.). Had the writers of that creed been beholden to a standard pattern of syllogistic reasoning, they would have had no way to declare that Christ is one person with two distinct natures.[20] The truth that Christ is fully God and fully man would lead inexorably either to a one-nature or a two-person Christology. But, as Chalcedon affirmed, this would be to deny the biblical teaching on the second person of the

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20. There are those who have sought to conform all biblical teaching to logical laws, and have introduced aberrant theology in the process. Gordon Clark, in a biting critique of the entirety of historic, orthodox Christology, both Catholic and Protestant, and in order to make Christology fit his (non-Christian) application of logic, argued that Christ is indeed two persons. Given his awkward definition of a person, however (viz., a collection of propositions), any definition including the word *person* cannot in this case be taken seriously. See Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1988), esp. 75–78.

Trinity. The truths of Scripture trump the standard syllogism, and should not be made to conform to it.

This is one central area in which "**abstract**" thinking is dangerous, even deadly, with respect to theological orthodoxy. Van Til's primary concern in this regard, especially as it touches on the issues surrounding the doctrine of common grace, has to do with the denial of the *historical* that ensues when abstract thinking is dominant:

> It is well to observe in this connection that a natural concomitant of the failure to distinguish between a Christian and a non-Christian foundation for true logic is the denial of the genuine significance of the historical. Given the belief in a self-sufficient God, the idea of temporal creation and genuine historical development is absurd. So says the non-believer. And so says the Arminian, using the neutral application of the syllogism. Calvinism, we are told, makes history to be a puppet dance. The Arminian has not seen the necessity of challenging the idea of a neutral logic. He reasons abstractly, as all non-believing philosophy does. The Arminian therefore also rejects the Reformed conception of history. He thinks of it as he thinks of philosophical determinism. (p. 38)

To reason abstractly is, for example, to take one truth—e.g., the truth of God's unconditional election—and to deduce from it that history is meaningless because it is predetermined. Or, to use another example, abstract reasoning would deduce that God's unconditional decree negates real, human responsibility. Abstract reasoning is inherently *nonhistorical*, and thus nonbiblical. It moves the Arminian, as it does the unbeliever (as well as the denier of common grace), toward a conclusion that negates Scripture's view of man and of history. And this is just to say that *concrete* thinking takes seriously the self-sufficiency (and meticulous sovereignty) of God, even while, at the same time, it affirms the meaningful progress of history and the real, meaningful, contingent, responsible choices of man.

We can see how the notion of fearless anthropomorphism is entailed in the plea for concrete thinking and for taking history seriously. Since God has come down in history, and has himself interacted meaningfully and significantly (even exhaustively) with and in the contingent progress of history, we must avoid any reasoning that moves deductively from God's sovereign decree and activity in eternity to a conclusion that denies or

otherwise undermines the significance of historical progress and contingency. In this case, the standard syllogism simply will not lead us to the truth of Scripture.

There is one particular pair of terms in Van Til's discussion of concrete thinking that could lead (and has led) to some confusion. In the section on concrete thinking in this volume, Van Til argues for a notion of "earlier" and of "later" with respect to our understanding of common grace. The idea of "earlier" and "later" may, on the surface, seem to refer simply to history, such that "earlier" refers to an earlier date on the calendar and "later" refers to a later date. But there is much more in view in Van Til's use of those terms than a simple dateline. Not only so, but the notions of "earlier" and "later" could, if improperly construed, sound more like abstract thinking than like concrete thinking, so it may be useful to attempt to bring clarity to his use of these two ideas.

Van Til uses the terms *earlier* and *later* in the context of the debates on whether or not there is such a thing as common grace. In those debates, the differing parties are in agreement about the doctrine of eternal election. In other words, those who affirm the reality of common grace (as does Van Til) and those who deny the reality of it (as does Hoeksema) agree that God's eternal counsel is behind whatsoever comes to pass. At issue for both sides, then, is not the nature of the decree, but the way in which we are to think about the historical manifestation of that decree. Is God's electing purpose such that he can display no favor toward the nonelect in history (as Hoeksema believed), or is there a (perhaps incomprehensible) harmony between God's electing purposes in eternity and his disposition(s) toward mankind in history? In attempting to address this conundrum, Van Til employs the ideas of "earlier" and "later."

For Van Til, the "earlier" of common grace begins with Adam. Because Adam is the representative of all mankind, God's favorable attitude toward Adam in the garden entails his favorable attitude, representatively, toward all mankind. Thus, Van Til sees "commonness" itself as having its roots in the creation of Adam, not simply as an individual man, but as our covenant head. When Adam sinned, the attitude of favor that God had toward Adam, and toward mankind as represented by Adam, changed (note the "fearlessly anthropomorphic" language here) to an attitude of wrath toward Adam and of common wrath toward all men in Adam. Van Til says that, given the fall, "the elect and the reprobate are under a *common wrath.* If there is meaning in this—and who denies it?—there may and must, with equal right, be said to be an earlier attitude of

common favor. Indeed, the reality of the 'common wrath' depends upon the fact of the earlier 'common grace'" (p. 90).

Note that Van Til puts the phrases *common wrath* and *common grace* in quotation marks here. He does that, in part, to highlight that the commonness in each case has its locus and focus in Adam as our covenant head, and not, at this point, in each person individually.

Van Til's biblical logic here is this: If it is the case that when Adam sinned, we all sinned, and thus when Adam sinned we all came under the wrath of God, then must it not also be the case that when God's attitude was favorable toward Adam in the garden, and when God *graciously* offered Adam the opportunity of eternal life, God was also favorable toward mankind generally and graciously offered eternal life to mankind in Adam? If so, then the wrath of God that comes to us individually, in history, presupposes the wrath that has come to us representatively by way of our common covenant head, Adam.

In other words, each of us individually is "dead in [our] trespasses and sins" because we are "by nature children of wrath, *like the rest of mankind*" (Eph. 2:1, 3). The wrath that is ours individually is what it is because of the wrath that is ours corporately. The "**earlier**," corporate wrath delimits, defines, and determines the "**later**," individual wrath that rests on each one of us "by nature," since the fall.

So also it is with the common grace of God. God's attitude of favor toward Adam, and his gracious offer of eternal life to him, includes, given Adam's covenant headship, God's attitude of favor toward all mankind and his gracious offer of eternal life to all mankind.

Once the fall occurs, however, Adam (and mankind with him) incurs the wrath of God, but Adam continues to live and breathe. He will continue, with Eve, to be fruitful and multiply. With the sweat of his brow, he will continue to subdue the earth. The wrath of God toward Adam is now initiated in the context of, and presupposes, God's common grace toward him as well. Not only so, but that common grace, as "**earlier**" grace, is the context in which the wrath of God, as well as the "special grace" covering of Adam and Eve, is given (Gen. 3:21–24). Thus, the "later" differentiating, special grace of God is what it is because of God's "**earlier**" common grace toward Adam, a common grace that allows for the incursion of God's wrath upon Adam.

A couple more points should be made with respect to the *earlier* and the *later*, as Van Til uses these terms. First, he says that "*after the common, in each case, comes the conditional*" (p. 90, emphasis original). So

whatever the commonness is with respect to us, it is *prior to* that which is conditional (i.e., "early"). In the case of Adam, for example, Van Til is making the point that God's attitude was favorable to Adam in the garden, and, representatively, to us, but his favor was to be seen as the context within which God's conditional requirement ("Do not eat from that tree") would be given. In other words, it was *as* he was favorable toward Adam that God (conditionally) said Adam and Eve would live eternally, should they not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So "common grace" was *earlier* because it was the context within which eternal life was promised to our first parents on the condition of continued obedience. (This will also apply to the free offer of the gospel, in which God's common grace is the background for the conditionality of that gospel offer.)

Second, with this in view, Van Til makes the further point that "**history is a process of differentiation**" (p. 90). By "**differentiation**," Van Til means that God's eternal decree of predestination and reprobation works itself out *for individuals*, *in history*. The common wrath of God has its meaning and application within the individual wrath that is ours "by nature." But it is a wrath that can only have its meaning and application within the context of God giving to *all men* life and breath and all things, of his rain and sunshine falling on both the elect and the reprobate. So also, the common grace of God has its meaning and application within the individual grace that is given to the elect.

As Van Til is sometimes wont to explain these truths using philosophical terms, this movement from "common" to "individual" is an example of the mutual relation of the one and the many, the universal and the particular, each finding its proper place, each entailing the other, with no primacy given to either.[21] The one, "commonness," has to be understood in light of its coherence with the many, "individuals," to whom the "commonness" is already (earlier) applied. Each without the other is vacuous; both together are meaningful.[22] As with fearless anthropomorphism, so also now with concrete thinking, the concern is to give full and due weight, biblically, to

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21. This refers us again to the presupposition of the ontological Trinity, in whom there is no primacy given to the one (God) or the three (persons).

22. The late South African Christian philosopher Hendrik Stoker speaks of these two concepts as a "coherential contrapolar contrast." Though technical, the phrase aptly (and alliteratively!) expresses the true relationship of the one and the many, or the universal and the particular, as that relationship is grounded in the "three-in-one" of God's character. See H. G. Stoker, "On the Contingent and Present-Day Western Man," in *The Idea of a Christian Philosophy: Essays in Honour of D. H. Th. Vollenhoven*, ed. K. A. Bril, H. Hart, and J. Klapwijk (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1973).

the crucial importance of history, and God's redemptive plan for history, in light of God's electing purposes.

In light of this discussion, Van Til takes up, as he says, "the most perplexing aspect of the perplexing problem of common grace," which he sees to be the problem of the "conditional" (p. 91). This "most perplexing problem" can be summarized in a question: how can it be that God's attitude toward all men could be one of wrath, when, in eternity, he already determined graciously to save some and to pass over others? Or, to put it another way, when Christ says to the crowds, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28), does that condition—to come to Christ—mean that all are under wrath until and unless they come? If so, what is the meaning of God's election? Not only so, but how can Christ offer this to all, when their eternal status with respect to Christ has already been determined, *by Christ himself* (together with the Father and the Spirit), before the foundation of the world?

Van Til proposes that if any progress is to be made in solving this "most perplexing problem," then "we shall need, in our humble opinion, to stress, as we have tried to do throughout, the idea of the earlier and the later, *that is to say, the historical correlativity of universal and particular*" (p. 91, emphasis added). The "idea of the earlier and the later," in other words, should be understood in the context of "the historical correlativity of universal and particular."

We need to remind ourselves at this point that all of this comes under the section entitled "The Positive Line of Concrete Thinking." So, what Van Til proposes here is not that we begin to think of the "universal" and the "particular" as abstract philosophical concepts. Rather, as he says, we need to see these two as historically, conceptually, and biblically-theologically correlative. In putting these terms into their proper, historical context, we avoid thinking of them in terms of "brute fact [i.e., particular] and abstract law [i.e., universal]" (p. 91). Instead, as we locate the universal and the particular in history, and as correlative, we see that God's (universal) common grace to all mankind can take its proper place only within the context of the (particular) application of special grace to the elect, as well as his passing over other individuals (particular) who are reprobate. There will be more on this in the next section.

In order to clarify his emphasis on the earlier and the later, as themselves an integral aspect of concrete thinking, Van Til takes an example from Valentijn Hepp. Van Til is concerned that Hepp seems to imply that it is possible for us to know, in a given group of people, who is elect and who

is not. For example, Hepp says, "Let us not look at the lot of the non-elect in the congregation from the view-point of judgment only" (p. 91). Statements like this illustrate what happens when we think abstractly and not concretely; we may begin to think that it is possible for us to know God's eternal choice. When we think this way, not only do we presume to know the mind of God, but, with respect to the earlier and the later, we undermine a proper understanding of the process of historical differentiation.

Such presumed determinations of who is elect and who is not are impossible, from the perspective of history, and thus they confuse the earlier and the later. So Van Til says that Hepp's view forgets "**the difference between the earlier and the later. The general presentation** [of the gospel] **comes to a generality** [of people]. **It comes to 'sinners,' differentiated, to be sure, as elect and reprobate in the mind of God, but yet,** *prior to their act of acceptance or rejection*, **regarded as a generality. To forget this is to** *move the calendar of God ahead*" (p. 92, emphases added).

To "move the calendar of God ahead" means, for Van Til, that we presume differentiation prematurely, in that we presume who is elect and who is reprobate. This presumption affirms the later, that is, the differentiation that takes place with individuals, without giving due credit to the earlier, that is, the gospel call that goes out to "**a generality**" (common grace). This shows, it seems to me, that Van Til's reference to "**the calendar**" has less to do with the historical progression of the calendar and more to do with God's application of his eternal decree to individuals in history. In other words, Van Til's concern is not about days or months, with respect to history, but about the application of God's plan in the days and months of history. The context for that application is the "**earlier**" common grace, which is the background for the "**later,**" conditional, special grace that comes to God's elect and the passing over that comes to the reprobate. The terms *earlier* and *later*, then, refer not simply to the progress of history, but to the conditionality of special grace that presupposes common grace.

With respect to that which is earlier, Van Til follows Calvin's argument against Pighius, and affirms that, prior to the fall, mankind, in Adam, was offered eternal life. As long as man, in Adam, continued in obedience, God would, in the future, finally and completely, give Adam, and thus all mankind, eternal life.[23] This offer of life could not have been anything

23. Much of Van Til's discussion in this volume utilizes and presupposes Calvin's terminology and arguments against Pighius. Note, for example, what Calvin says with respect to the offer of eternal life before the fall: "The truth of the matter is, that salvation was not

other than "common," and it was certainly "gracious." It was not gracious in the context of sin, but rather in the context of God's free determination to give the gift of eternal life to man—something that God did not have to do.[24] Thus, there is a kind of "**common grace**" before the fall, which sets the stage both for "**common wrath**" at and after the fall and for the common grace that is presupposed in God's universal wrath toward man. All of this is the foundation for the differentiation that takes place throughout history—as the call of the gospel goes out indiscriminately and sincerely to all (universal) and the elect are brought in (individually), while the reprobate (individually) reject the call of the gospel and remain in their sins (particular).

So, continues Van Til, following Calvin, the universality of the gospel promise "comes to sinful mankind, to mankind that has once before, when 'placed in a way of salvation,' been offered salvation. It comes to a generality that has once in common, in one moment, in one man, rejected the offer of eternal life through Adam. Mankind is now, to use words corresponding to the earlier stage, *placed in a way of death*" (pp. 93–94). That which corresponds to the earlier stage is not, we should note, simply that which is historically earlier. Van Til's point is that what corresponds to the earlier stage is that which is common to all mankind (both common wrath and common grace). So, the offer of life in the garden was an offer to Adam and, in him, an offer to all mankind. So also, when that offer was rejected by virtue of Adam's disobedience,

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offered to all men on any other ground than on the condition of their remaining in their original innocence." John Calvin, *A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, in *Calvin's Calvinism*, trans. Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 92. It seems, as well, that Van Til's notion of conditionality harks back to Calvin's arguments.

24. This refers us back to our previous discussion of God's covenant as voluntary condescension. The notion that the covenant that God made with man had its foundation in his unmerited favor, or grace (though not grace as a response to sin), is nothing new in Reformed thought; neither does it undermine or in any way negate man's responsibility to be obedient to God's commands. According to Muller, "Divine grace, as indicated both in the doctrine of the divine attributes and in the developing Reformed covenant theology of the seventeenth century, is not merely the outward favor of God toward the elect, evident only in the postlapsarian dispensation of salvation; rather is it one of the perfections of the divine nature. It is a characteristic of God's relations to the finite order apart from sin, in the act of divine condescension to relate to finite creatures. . . . There is, both in the orthodox Reformed doctrine of God and in the orthodox Reformed covenant theology of the seventeenth century, a consistent identification of *grace as fundamental to all of God's relationships with the world and especially with human beings, to the point of the consistent assertion that the covenant of nature or works is itself gracious*." Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*: *The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3: *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 570 (emphasis added).

mankind was "**placed in a way of death.**" The "**earlier**" of which Van Til speaks, then, is directly related to that which is common in history. So, it has its focus in history, but is not simply an historical timeline.

Further on, Van Til asks a question directly relevant to our discussion above of fearless anthropomorphism: "**Must we say that the wrath of God under which they rest, according to the revealed will of God, does not tell us of the real attitude of God to them?**" (p. 95). In other words, how properly and biblically ought we to think about God's attitude toward the elect and the nonelect? To answer this, Van Til moves again to mankind before the fall.

With respect to men before the fall, "**It was not some abstraction like creatureliness in them that was the object of God's favor. As concrete beings, eventually to be haters of God but not yet in history haters of God, rather, as yet in Adam good before God, the reprobate are the objects of God's favor**" (p. 96). That is, Adam is not the covenant head of an abstraction like "**creatureliness**"; rather, he is the covenant head of real people—of every one of us—and God's disposition toward him is identical to his disposition toward us. In affirming this, Van Til also warns, "**We are, therefore, to steer clear of Platonic abstractions. We are not to use the general offer of the gospel as an abstract idea**" (p. 97). The general offer of the gospel has its genesis in Genesis; after the fall, it comes to Adam particularly, and to all mankind generally, in Adam. It then, as history progresses, comes to individual people, even as they themselves are each represented in the first man, Adam. There is the universal (mankind) and the particular (Adam), and to focus on one at the expense of the other is to think in abstraction, not concretely.

A close reading of this volume will help flesh out the points we are making here, but there is one concluding and crucial point with respect to "**concrete thinking**" that needs to be broached here. In speaking of "earlier" and "later," Van Til says, "**All common grace is earlier grace. Its commonness lies in its earliness**" (p. 99). By this, as we have seen, he means to point out that commonness was a function of Adam's covenantal headship, such that there was an attitude of favor toward all mankind, in Adam, originally, and there was an attitude of both common grace and common wrath toward all mankind, in Adam, at and after the fall. These attitudes provide the background and context in which God's electing purposes are carried out in redemptive history. To use Van Til's terminology, the "**universal**" of commonness has to be seen in the context

of the "particular" of salvation for the elect and condemnation for the reprobate, and vice versa. To isolate one at the expense of the other is to do an injustice to both.

It should be seen as well that Van Til helps us to think concretely, that is, *historically*, as we contemplate the antithesis between believer and unbeliever in the context of God's common grace. He says:

> So while we seek with all our power to hasten the process of differentiation in every dimension we are yet thankful, on the other hand, for "the day of grace," the day of undeveloped differentiation. Such tolerance as we receive on the part of the world is due to this fact that we live in the earlier, rather than the later, stage of history. And such influence on the public situation as we can effect, whether in society or in state, presupposes this undifferentiated stage of development. (pp. 102–3)

Two comments here may help to clarify Van Til's points. First, Van Til says that we are to "hasten the process of differentiation in every dimension." What does he mean by that? Generally speaking, he means that we are to preach the gospel to all men, both believer and unbeliever, and to make that gospel known in our cultural activity as well. He mentions, in this context, the necessity for Christian schools. Such schools are (or should be) one attempt, among many, to show forth the radical and distinct differences that obtain between believer and unbeliever. They are meant to make clear that there is no neutral territory—not counting, not weighing, not measuring or anything—to which Christians can appeal. Common grace does not mean common education; the commonness of common grace can never imply neutrality.

In this "hastening," the world, at various times and in various ways, remains tolerant. Its tolerance varies with time and place, but no situation is as bad as depravity demands. This tolerance, notes Van Til, "is due to this fact that we live in the earlier, rather than the later, stage of history."

The point to be made in this last comment is that, again, Van Til is not simply thinking here of a historical timeline, such that tolerance means only that we have not reached the end of history. It does mean, of course, that when the end of history comes, historical differentiation will be complete. The sheep will be finally, completely, and eternally separated from the

goats. But we should also remember that "*all* common grace is earlier grace." We live in the "**earlier**" stage of history whenever and wherever, in any particular context, the differentiation of elect and reprobate has yet to obtain.

An example here may help. In the library of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia there is a picture of Van Til on Wall Street in New York, Bible in hand, preaching to a crowd of listeners. That event itself shows forth an "**earlier**" stage in history; the "**undifferentiated**" crowd that is there, is there only by virtue of God's common grace. If, by God's special grace, someone came to know and believe on Christ in that crowd, there is evidence of both an earlier and a later aspect of God's grace. The "**conditional**" of the (later) gospel presupposes the common grace (earlier) of the crowd. So also with those who reject the gospel. The (earlier) common grace that allowed for the preaching of the gospel to that crowd, includes as well the (later) individual responses to that preaching. Differentiation takes place; the earlier (common grace) is correlative to the later of conditional differentiation.

This is "**concrete**" thinking; it embeds the reality of God's disposition toward mankind squarely in the historical process of differentiation. That differentiation is itself concrete, in that it is God's application of election, and his passing over of reprobation, that is taking place each day in history. The earlier and the later, the universal and the particular, the common and the individual, are historically correlative; they explain and delimit each other in the historical process, by virtue of God providentially—both commonly and individually—working out his eternal decree in history.[25]

In sum, then, "if we reason *concretely* about God and his relation to the world, we simply *listen to what God has told us in his Word* on the matter" (p. 191, emphases added). This brings us to our third and final theme.

(3) LIMITING CONCEPTS

We will remember that Van Til sees the notion of a *limiting concept* (as it is understood in a Christian way) as the glue that binds together the essays collected in this book. So understanding what he means by a "**limiting concept**" is central to understanding the book as a whole. But we could not move to an explanation of this term without first fleshing

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25. In support of Van Til's analysis here, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 76.

out our previous two themes, since *limiting concept* entails both *fearless anthropomorphism* and *concrete thinking*, and thus it was necessary to spend some time on those terms in order to understand this last controlling idea properly. Now that we have the first two in mind, we may be able to see why this third theme is, in Van Til's estimation, central to his arguments in these essays.

We need initially to recognize what a Christian "**limiting concept**" is, according to Van Til. In the first essay in this volume, he says:

> It is over against this post-Kantian view of the "limiting concept" that the writer speaks of a Christian limiting concept. This enables him, he thinks, to set off a truly biblical concept of mystery based on the God of Scripture, who is light and in whom is no darkness at all, from the non-Christian, in particular from the modern philosophical, concept of mystery. In the former case there is an intelligible, though not an exhaustive, intellectually penetrable basis for human experience. In the latter case man has no intelligible basis for his experience and, what is worse, insults the Christ who came to bring him light and life. (p. xlviii–xlix)

The term *limiting concept,* as used by Van Til, is a term that helps him to explain a "**biblical concept of mystery based on the God of Scripture.**" Not only so, but to employ the non-Christian notion of a "**limiting concept**" and, thus, of mystery, destroys any basis at all for understanding human experience.

As we will see throughout this book, mystery is at the root of all Christian theology. When we affirm the ontological Trinity, the incarnation, the covenant of God with man, etc., we are articulating the truth of the matter, according to Scripture, but we are also affirming that our minds are not able to put the truth of the matter together in a way that is completely amenable to our usual ways of thinking. Perhaps the best word to denominate a teaching that requires us to affirm that which cannot be delimited by our laws of thought is "hyperdox," that is, a teaching of Scripture that must be affirmed, though it does not conform to, but rather transcends, standard rules of thought.[26] That is, these are teachings (*dox*) that are above (*hyper*) our typical (and proper) ways of thinking.

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26. This term is from H. G. Stoker and may be preferable to the term *paradox*. A paradox refers to two mutually implied teachings that are set side by side; a hyperdox includes

Van Til refers to these teachings as "**apparent contradictions.**" By that, he does not mean that they are explicit and obvious violations of the law of noncontradiction or some other canon of formal logic. That is, we do not affirm, for example, that God's attitude toward all men is gracious in the same way that God's attitude toward all men is not gracious. Similarly, we do not affirm that God is three in the same way that he is one. Nor do we affirm that Christ is God in the same way that he is man. There are deep and abiding issues in these truths of compatibility, but incompatibilities are not, per se, contradictions.

Van Til's notion of "**apparent contradiction**" is shorthand for recognizing that we are not able completely to subsume much of biblical teaching under our standard laws of thought. Our laws of thinking are not able exhaustively to demarcate the meaning of what we affirm to be true in Scripture. The problem is not, we should note, with our standard ways of thinking. God has created us so that we are not meant both to affirm and to deny the same thing at the same time and in the same way. He has created us so that we distinguish one thing from another (i.e., diversity). He has also created us to see and affirm the myriad relationships of differing things (i.e., unity). This is all part of "thinking God's thoughts after him."

The issue with respect to "hyperdoxes," then, is that an understanding of the character of God and his activity in the world will always transcend the typical ways we are meant to understand and know the world. Furthermore, and more importantly, the mystery of biblical teaching, the hyperdoxes given to us in Scripture, should form the foundation and basis for our typical ways of thinking. That is, we are not meant to apply our laws of thinking as far as we possibly can and then refer the remainder to "mystery." Rather, we *begin* with mystery, because we *begin* with the triune God himself. In that way, at minimum, we recognize that our typical ways of thinking are limited, are in need of their own foundation, and have their own God-given boundaries.

The controlling principle embedded in the Christian notion of a limiting concept, as Van Til uses it, is that God's revelation gives us truths—essential and basic truths—that the Christian will not be able to produce or affirm by using our basic rules of thought. We affirm what we believe and do

those two (or more) teachings, but affirms that they are above and beyond our human ability to understand. See Hendrik G. Stoker, "Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Professor Dr. Cornelius Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 30.

through God's infallible and inerrant revelation to us. As Van Til says, "The various teachings of Scripture are not related to one another in the way that syllogisms of a series are related. The 'system of truth' of Scripture presupposes the existence of the internally, eternally, self-coherent, triune God who reveals Himself to man with unqualified authority" (p. xlviii).[27]

As Van Til will make clear, especially as he has in mind Calvin's response to Pighius, the Arminian objection to much of Reformed theology can be easily stated in a syllogism. "Pighius knows how to employ a well-turned syllogism. There is no escaping the force of his objection. If God is the ultimate cause back of whatsoever comes to pass, Pighius can, on his basis, rightly insist that God is the cause of sin" (p. 81). Moreover, says Van Til, "from the point of view of a non-Christian logic the Reformed Faith can be bowled over by means of a single syllogism" (p. 89).

The crucial point to be recognized here, however, is that the application of the syllogism, as well as other rules of thinking, to the Christian faith will have the effect of bringing God down from his majestic heights, and lifting man up to a presumed place of utter autonomy. God becomes less than sovereign, while man becomes the only and ultimate interpreter of his would-be autonomous experience.

This is, as Van Til makes clear, exactly the point that Paul is making in Romans 9:20. Paul recognizes, as he lays out the reality of unconditional election, that some in the church will be reasoning according to the very syllogism that Pighius uses against Calvin; they will not be inclined to submit their laws of thought to biblical truth. How does Paul address this problem?

We will recognize that the objections that Paul anticipated and addressed in this chapter are, nevertheless, objections that still flourish in many Christian circles. They flourish, however, not because God has failed to address them, but rather because there is a sinful tendency to ignore or otherwise mute Paul's responses.

First, Paul responds to the charge that election is unfair: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says

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27. Since this point can be misunderstood, we should make clear here that, in all of this, we still do and must *use* our reason. To affirm "this and then that" is to make use of our cognitive faculties. This is why we have confined our discussion in this section to "our typical (or standard) rules of thought." Those rules, while used by our cognitive faculties, are not identical to those faculties.

to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'" (Rom. 9:14–15). How could it be the case that God is unfair when his very choice of Jacob over Esau is grounded in his wholly good, sovereign, and independent character? God would be unfair if his choice of Jacob over Esau (and the elect over the reprobate) were arbitrary. But to be arbitrary would mean, for God, that there is some standard outside of him to which he is duty bound to adhere. God is his own wholly good standard. So Paul reminds us that God's own character is itself the absolute standard: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy." Because God's choice is grounded in his character, it is a choice with the highest and most absolute rationale. The fact that we may not know that rationale is no argument against it (see Deut. 29:29). His judgments are, and remain, unsearchable to us (Rom. 11:33).

Paul then responds to the objection that if God determines who are his and who are not, even prior to their birth, simply on the basis of his sovereign choice, then surely he cannot blame anyone but himself for the outcome. How could he blame the reprobate, whose destiny was determined before the foundation of the world? To answer this objection, Paul refers again to God's sovereign character and sovereign right to do as he pleases:

> You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Rom. 9:19–21)

The main objections that have been incessantly lodged against the biblical view of God's electing purposes were already anticipated by God himself, through his apostle, and were answered. To aver that the answers are not satisfactory is to complain that God's own character is insufficient to ground his eternal actions. It is, in effect, to complain about the character of God himself. That is Paul's point.

Given this biblical teaching, it should be obvious that Reformed theology, confessing as it does God's absolute independence and sovereignty, requires the notion of limiting concepts. A theology that maps the teachings of Scripture according to standard laws of thought will have no puzzle to solve. The mind of man is fully capable, so it is thought, of putting all

these apparent conundrums neatly together. In piecing together all the pieces of the puzzle by way of reason, however, the sovereign majesty of God is negated and the mind of man is exalted to the point of idolatry. So, says Van Til:

> Only those who are seriously concerned with interpreting the whole of history in terms of the counsel of God can be puzzled by the question of that which is "common" between believer and unbeliever. For both the Roman Catholic and the Arminian it is a foregone conclusion that there are large areas of life on which the believer and the unbeliever agree without any difference. Only he who is committed to the basic absolute of God's counsel can, and will, be puzzled by the meaning of the relative. (p. 18)

For Arminianism, there is no absolute counsel of God. All is relative to man's free and autonomous decision. But for Reformed theology, the absolute counsel of God is a limiting concept, requiring, as it does, the "**relative**" of the historical process. And this is an all-important point: limiting concepts, in order properly and biblically to be understood, *require* each other. They are not properly understood in isolation.[28]

So also for common grace. If one thinks that, given God's eternal and unconditional decree of election and reprobation, there is no room for common grace, then one is attempting to understand God's activity in history only in terms that logically flow from that eternal decree. In that case, there are no limiting concepts because God's decree in eternity is the only determiner of what happens in history. There can be no wrath (in history) for those chosen (in eternity), and no grace (in history) for those not chosen (in eternity).

But Scripture clearly urges us otherwise. Those who were by nature children of wrath, Paul says, were the very ones whom God made alive in Christ (Eph. 2:1–10). Thus, they were both under wrath and elect. So the electing purposes of God are themselves a limiting concept, entailing, as they do, the transition of God's disposition toward the elect from wrath

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28. To say that these concepts *require* each other does not necessarily imply that they are conceptually or ontologically equivalent. There would be ontological equivalence for example, in our understanding of God as one (in essence) and three (in persons), but there would not be ontological equivalence in our affirmation of Christ as God (essentially) and man (covenantally).

to grace in history. So also God's decree of reprobation from before the foundation of the world requires the limiting concept of his goodness to all (Ps. 145:9) and the good gifts of rain and sunshine for all (Matt. 5:45), even as they reject the gospel and thus further the final differentiation of history.

Although Van Til does not explicitly bring together his notion of limiting concepts in the context of our two previous themes, we can begin to see how and why the ideas of **"concrete thinking"** and **"fearless anthropomorphism"** are inextricably linked to it. As we discussed, the quintessential culmination of fearless anthropomorphism is given to us in the person of Christ himself. In Christ, we have the limiting concept of the divine nature (which is eternal and essential to who he is as Son) entailing his human nature (which is **"relative,"** in that it depends on God's free decision to redeem). The absolute (divine nature) and the relative (human nature), assuming, in the latter, God's free decision, entail each other. One without the other is meaningless with respect to his incarnate person. Not only so, but these two natures are not in conflict, but are brought together in the union of the person himself. So, in the end, there is no real conflict between the two, but rather unity—even though we are unable to bring the concepts together in our own minds.

This also demonstrates the importance of concrete thinking. We might be tempted to reason that the divine person of the Son could never *really* unite himself to anything created; that would undermine his deity and bring him down to the level of creation. But such thinking is only abstract. It is the kind of thinking that one would see in Islam, for example, beholden as it is to the dictates of reason.[29] To think concretely, however, is to affirm that God has come down to the level of creation. But in no way did that condescension detract from his full and majestic deity. The Son did not give up his deity in order to be man. The glorious truth of the gospel is that he remained who he is even while he became man for us and for our salvation. Without the notion of a limiting concept, in other words, not only is common grace not given its proper biblical weight, but the gospel itself loses its glory and grace. So, says Van Til: **"So far from being a system of philosophical determinism that stultifies human knowledge and responsibility, the Reformed faith, being unreservedly based on biblical exegesis, is alone able to deliver**

29. To see how this rational principle of Islam is worked out and addressed, see K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013).

to men the unadulterated joy of the gospel as it is in the Christ of the Scriptures" (p. xlix).

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This discussion should suffice as a thematic and theological introduction to Van Til's consistent concerns as he addressed the doctrine of common grace throughout most of his career. The initial essay in this book dates to 1947, and it is likely that the last chapter of this book, written in 1972 and unpublished until this book was first put together, was the last thing that Van Til published in his career. The seamless character of these essays shows the consistency of Van Til's approach to the subject of common grace over the decades of his teaching ministry.

One other point is worthy of mention, and could easily have occupied this entire foreword, in that it deserves an extended essay. Of considerable interest in the last chapter is the following: "We join Schilder in rejecting Kuyper's distinction between Christ as the mediator of creation and as the mediator of redemption. We must unite the idea of creation in Christ with that of His redemption of all things" (p. 260).

The notion of uniting "the idea of creation in Christ with that of His redemption" certainly implies that the goal of Christ's mediatorial work is not twofold, as if he is the mediator of creation with one goal and the mediator of redemption with another. Rather, the goal of Christ as mediator is one, namely, to make known to us "the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι) all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9–10). "All things," therefore, are not meant to be placed in two different realms—one of common grace and one of special grace—but rather are to be brought together under one head, united in the *one* covenant of grace. History is moving inexorably toward the destruction of all Christ's enemies, as they are, by virtue of the gospel, made a footstool for his feet (see Col. 1:20; Rom. 11:36). This truth deserves much more attention than we have space to give it here, and it deserves much more study and attention than it currently receives in Reformed circles; but Van Til is clear in this last publication that the covenant of grace, including as it does the antithesis between believer and unbeliever, must be the presupposition of common grace, and thus there is meant to be now,

as there will certainly be in the future, a universal demonstration of the lordship of Christ over all of life.

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For this annotated second edition, I have provided translations where needed. I have also tried to include some historical detail and biography on most of the people mentioned herein and to explain some of the possibly confusing terminology that Van Til employs. Except for some augmentation of Van Til's source references, the additions (mainly here and in the notes) appear in the typeface you are now reading. Van Til's material, appearing in a more traditional text font, is otherwise virtually untouched.

I want to thank P&R Publishing for their commitment to republishing this important and central work in Van Til's corpus. It is impossible to understand Van Til's thought rightly without grasping the depth of his career-long exposition of common grace.

Finally, I want to thank Paul Maxwell for his energetic and tireless efforts and help in pulling many of the details of this work together.

Author's Note

The first three chapters of this little book first appeared in 1947 as a pamphlet entitled *Common Grace.*[1] Chapter four, "Particularism and Common Grace," appeared under the same title in 1951.[2] The fifth chapter, "Common Grace and Witness-bearing," first appeared in the *Torch and Trumpet,* December, 1954–January, 1955, and was later published as a separate booklet.[3] Chapter six likewise appeared in booklet form, under the same title, "A Letter on Common Grace."[4] Chapter seven originally appeared as an appendix to my class syllabus on *Systematic Theology.*[5] The eighth chapter is a book review which appeared in *The Westminster Theological Journal* in November, 1968.[6] The ninth and final chapter has not appeared in publication before.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that these chapters do not form one unified whole, nor are they a collection of unrelated remarks. They are separate attempts to deal with particular aspects of the one theme—that of Common Grace and its relevance to the gospel.

1. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947).

2. Cornelius Van Til, *Particularism and Common Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: L. J. Grotenhuis, n.d.).

3. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and Witness-Bearing* (Phillipsburg, NJ: L. J. Grotenhuis, 1955).

4. Cornelius Van Til, *A Letter on Common Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: L. J. Grotenhuis, n.d.).

5. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1966).

6. Cornelius Van Til, review of *Reformed Dogmatics,* by Herman Hoeksema, *Westminster Theological Journal* 31 (1968): 83–94.

PREFACE

The present writer has from time to time been engaged in a study of the subject of *Common Grace.* The various brief studies published on this subject over a period of years are now brought together in the present volume.

The subject of Common Grace was originally of interest to the present writer because it seemed to him to have basic significance for the subject of Christian Apologetics. Anyone holding to the Reformed faith is constantly required to explain how he can do justice to the "universalism" of the gospel as presented in Scripture. How can he hold to election, especially "double election," without doing violence to the "whosoever will" aspect of biblical teaching?[1] How can he hold to "total depravity" and yet find a "point of contact" for the gospel among men in general?[2]

There is no way of discussing these problems adequately except by way of setting forth the entire "philosophy of history" as the

1. There is thought to be tension between the Reformed faith and the "universalism" of the gospel because of the Reformed view of God's eternal decree, including election. If it is true, as the Westminster Confession of Faith says, that "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death" (3.3), then it might be supposed that this same God, who ordains and decrees who will be saved and who will not, cannot sincerely call all men to repentance. Thus, the "universalism" (calling all men to repent) of the gospel is in tension with the particular election and reprobation of God's eternal decree.

2. The tension between a Reformed notion of total depravity and an apologetic "point of contact" is different from the tension mentioned in the previous footnote. If all men are totally depraved, in that they are truly dead in their trespasses and sins, how could the truth of Scripture ever really "connect" with that depravity? To use an analogy, what could be said to a person who is truly dead that would cause him to respond? If the condition of man is spiritual death, then, it is thought, nothing we say to him could ever really reach him. And yet, we are commanded to preach the Word, so that people might be saved.

Reformed confessions teach it. When the Reformed view of the philosophy of history is set forth on a frankly biblical basis it appears that the questions pertaining to "human responsibility" and to "the point of contact" find their "solution" in the Reformed faith and nowhere else.

But then, to say this is not to say that the "solution" offered on these questions is a "systematic" one, in the sense that it is logically penetrable by the intellect of man. The biblical "system of truth" is not a "deductive system." The various teachings of Scripture are not related to one another in the way that syllogisms of a series are related. The "system of truth" of Scripture presupposes the existence of the internally, eternally, self-coherent, triune God who reveals Himself to man with unqualified authority.[3]

On the surface, and by the sound of words, all this might seem to indicate a neo-orthodox approach to the question of God and His relation to man. The opposite is the case. The neo-orthodox view of the relation of God to man is based on the idea that since man cannot have a "systematic," i.e., purely rationalist knowledge of God, he must, in purely irrationalist fashion, fall back on the notion that any "systematic" interpretation of God's "revelation" is nothing more than a "pointer" toward something of which man knows nothing. That is to say, the neo-orthodox view of God's relation to man is based on the modern, particularly the post-Kantian, philosophical notion of truth as being nothing but a limiting concept. Man is surrounded by an ultimate void and he must direct the "flashlight" of his intellect into impenetrable mist.[4] It is over

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3. This is a monumentally important point, as it serves to set Scripture in its proper, foundational place in theology. Reformed theology is a *system* of theology. It confesses biblical doctrines that entail and imply each other, and that cohere and are consistent. But this does not mean that the doctrines are comprehensively understood, or that they are confessed because our minds have penetrated to their depths, so that we know exactly how they all relate. Following from the paragraphs above, Van Til is making explicit the fact that biblical teaching cannot simply be arrived at by a simple syllogism (deductively). One might infer, for example, that since God chose his own people in eternity, and all those chosen will necessarily be saved, that there can be no sincere offer of the gospel to all men or legitimate command from God that all repent. But this kind of reasoning, no matter how logically valid, will not stand the scrutiny of Scripture. We derive our doctrines from Scripture, and the dictates of reason are meant to serve, rather than rule, in our systematizing of those doctrines. See K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006).

4. Here Van Til assumes that the relationship of Kantian philosophy to neoorthodox theology is grasped. A "limiting concept," for Immanuel Kant, was something posited by him so that we would recognize the limits of our understanding. Kant posited a "noumenal"

against this post-Kantian view of the "limiting concept" that the writer speaks of a Christian limiting concept. This enables him, he thinks, to set off a truly biblical concept of mystery based on the God of Scripture, who is light and in whom is no darkness at all, from the non-Christian, in particular from the modern philosophical, concept of mystery. In the former case there is an intelligible, though not an exhaustive, intellectually penetrable basis for human experience. In the latter case man has no intelligible basis for his experience and, what is worse, insults the Christ who came to bring him light and life.[5]

This is the point of view that binds the several chapters of this book together. So far from being a system of philosophical determinism that stultifies human knowledge and responsibility, the Reformed faith, being unreservedly based on biblical exegesis, is alone able to deliver to men the unadulterated joy of the gospel as it is in the Christ of the Scriptures.

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realm as a limiting concept, since our understanding of the "phenomenal" realm could never extend to things as they are in themselves. Thus, the noumenal was the "limiting concept" of the phenomenal.

Much of Kant's philosophical structure and content was taken over by neoorthodox theology. Put simply, neoorthodoxy set forth a "wholly other" (i.e., noumenal) God, who is "known" (to the extent that he is) only in a revelatory Event. The "truth" of that revelation-Event is strictly experiential; it comes, not through Scripture, but directly from above. Even so, it has its origin in a God who is "wholly other" and thus ultimately unknowable. So what is known in the revelation-Event is a limiting concept, directing us to the "impenetrable mist" of a wholly other, and unknowable, God. What Van Til is saying is the opposite of neoorthodoxy because (1) he takes the truth of Scripture seriously, as the Word of God, and thus (2) God's incomprehensibility is predicated on the basis of that truth, not in spite of it.

5. That is to say, the Christian view of mystery is that mystery *is not* ultimate, in that God is light; there is nothing mysterious or unknown to him. The non-Christian view of mystery is that mystery *is* ultimate, in that it serves only to "limit" what we know.

PART ONE

THE CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

The question of where he may find a point of contact with the world for the message that he brings is a matter of grave concern to every Christian minister and teacher.[1] The doctrine of common grace seeks, in some measure at least, to supply this answer. But to give the answer desired the concept of common grace must be set in its proper theological context. In discussing the problem, the present paper accordingly deals with (1) the Christian philosophy of history of which the common grace doctrine is a part, (2) the most comprehensive modern statement of this problem, (3) the salient features of the recent debate on the subject, and (4) some suggestions for further study.

The common grace[2] problem may quite properly be considered as being a part or aspect of the problem of the philosophy

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1. The question of "point of contact" is multifaceted. For Van Til, "The point of contact for the gospel, then, must be sought within the natural man. Deep down in his mind every man knows that he is the creature of God and responsible to God." Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2008), 116. Included in this point of contact is man's covenant relationship, in that all men are surrounded by an exhaustively personal environment, which is the presence of their God and Creator. Thus, being always in contact with the truth, both within and without, we can appeal to that truth in our defense of Christianity. For more on point of contact, see Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 90n2.

2. Though the question is a matter of debate we shall, for convenience, not enclose the phrase "common grace" in quotation marks. We use the phrase, and others like it, loosely.

of history. Dr. K. Schilder[3] speaks of Abraham Kuyper's[4] great three-volume work on "Common Grace" as an epic. And an epic it truly is. In setting forth his views on common grace Kuyper envelops the whole course of human culture in his field of vision. Common grace is said to be in large measure responsible for making history as a whole what it has been, is, and will be. On the other hand in rejecting the doctrine of common grace the Rev. Herman Hoeksema[5] in his various writings also takes the whole of history for his field. He argues that history can best be explained if we reject common grace. It may be well then if even at the outset we question ourselves about the Christian philosophy of history. Doing so at this early stage of our paper will help us in understanding both those who affirm and those who deny common grace.

3. Klaas Schilder (1890–1952) is perhaps best known as the father of the Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt), or "Liberated Churches" (known as the Gereformeerde Kerken onderhoudende artikel 31 van de Kerkenorde—"Reformed Churches supporting article 31 of the Church Order"). Schilder was educated in the Gereformeerde Gymnasium of Kampen from 1903 to 1909. In 1914, he graduated with honors from the theological school of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Kampen. From 1914 to 1933, he served six different congregations. After earning his Ph.D. from the University of Erlangen in Germany, his denomination called him to succeed A. G. Honig as professor of dogmatic theology. Schilder was arrested for opposition to the Nazis, after which, for other reasons, he was deposed from ministry in August of 1944. This led to the founding of the Liberated Churches that year. Controversy followed Schilder; his views of the covenant and of the church were controversial. Of specific concern here is that he debated Herman Hoeksema on the issue of common grace and covenant. Most popular among Schilder's works is the translation of his *Christus en cultuur*. See Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg: Premier, 1977). For more on Schilder, see J. Geertsema, *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995).

4. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was a theologian and politician. Prime minister of the Netherlands from 1900 to 1905, Kuyper sought to apply his Calvinistic theology in the area of politics. In theology, he is best known for his contributions in the areas of Christian worldview and theological encyclopedia and for his development of the Reformed doctrine of common grace. See Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1898); Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie* [Common grace], 2nd printing (Kampen: Kok, 1931–32); Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring* [Sovereignty in its own sphere] (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880). For an excellent analysis of Kuyper on worldview, see Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

5. It would not be overstating the case to affirm that it was, primarily, Herman Hoeksema (1886–1965) who began the debate on common grace in Reformed circles in the twentieth century. Hoeksema opposed the "Three Points of Common Grace" adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 (see the appendix in Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*). His opposition to the notion of common grace led to his deposition from office in the Christian Reformed Church, after which he (and a few others who agreed with him) began the Protestant Reformed Churches of America. Hoeksema was a pastor and teacher in the Protestant Reformed denomination from 1924 to 1964.

In any philosophy of history men seek to systematize the "facts" of history. The many "facts" of history are to be brought into one pattern. Or, if we wish, we may say that the many "facts" of history are to be regarded *in the light of* one pattern. The philosophy of history is, accordingly, an aspect of the perplexing *One and Many* problem.[6]

Furthermore, in a philosophy of history the "facts" are regarded under the aspect of *change*. If there be other sciences that deal primarily with the "static," the philosophy of history deals primarily with the "dynamic" behavior of "Reality." It is natural, then, that in handling the problem of the philosophy of history the very existence of a single pattern of these *many*, and particularly of these *changing many*, should be called in question. That is to say, for one who *does not* base his thinking upon Christian presuppositions, it is natural to question the existence of an all-embracing pattern present in, and underneath, the changing "facts" of history. For one who *does* base his thinking upon Christian presuppositions it would, on the other hand, be unnatural or even self-contradictory to do so. For him the most basic fact of all facts is the existence of the triune God. About this God he has learned from Scripture. For the Christian, the study of the philosophy of history is an effort to see life whole and see it through, but always in the light of the pattern shown him in the Mount.[7] He cannot question, even when he cannot fully explain, the pattern of Scripture, in the light of which he regards the facts of history.

But to interpret facts—all facts and especially all facts in their changing aspect—in the light of an already fully given word of God is to be "unscientific" in the eyes of current science, philosophy

6. The "perplexing *One and Many* problem" is a philosophical problem that focuses attention on how we can relate individual facts (the many) to a more general, or universal, category (the one). This is not, we should note, a problem that plagues most people, but it has been a perennial problem in the history of philosophy. When philosophers deal with such things as the problem of meaning, they attempt to work through how a statement such as "I saw a dog" is meaningful. To be meaningful, there must be some notion of "dog" that is more than just an individual fact, so that anyone hearing the statement would employ a universal notion of "dogginess" in order to understand the statement about the individual dog that was seen. There has to be some relation between the many (individual dogs) and the one (dogginess).

7. Van Til is likely referring here to the pattern of the temple that Solomon built, which was given to his father David on Mount Moriah. Van Til used this as an analogy of how Christians should think about their cultural task. Like Solomon building the temple, they must think of it in terms that are laid down in God's Word.

and theology. Current methodology assumes the non-createdness of all the facts of the universe; it assumes the ultimacy of change. In this it follows the Greeks. With Cochrane[8] we may therefore speak of the classical-modern position and set it off against the Christian position.[9]

The believer and the non-believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation. The "factness" of the first fact they meet is in question. The several schools of non-Christian thought have different principles of individuation.[10] Some find their principle in "reason" while others find it in the "space-time continuum." But all agree, by implication at least, that it is not to be found where the Christian finds it—in the counsel of God.[11]

It is sometimes suggested that though there is a basic difference between the Christian and the non-Christian explanation, there is no such difference in the mere description of facts. With this we cannot agree. Modern scientific description is not the innocent thing that we as Christians all too easily think it is. Sir Arthur Eddington's famed "ichthyologist" readily suggests this.[12] This "ichthyologist" explores the life of the ocean. In surveying his catch he makes two statements: (1) "No sea-creature is less than two inches long; (2) All sea-creatures have gills."[13] If an observer questions the first statement the "ichthyologist" replies that in his work as a scientist he is not concerned with an "objective kingdom of fishes." The

8. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

9. Charles N. Cochrane (1889–1945) was a Canadian. Educated at the University of Toronto and at Oxford, he spent his career teaching at the University of Toronto. The book to which Van Til refers traces the impact of Christianity on the Greco-Roman world.

10. A *principle of individuation* is that by which one thing can be distinguished from another. Going back at least to Aristotle, whose principle of individuation was tied to his theory of form and matter, it is one of the central aspects of the "one and many" problem that Van Til mentions above.

11. Van Til highlights "reason" and the "space-time continuum," apparently, due to Cochrane's discussion of those matters in the book referenced above.

By "the counsel of God," Van Til means God's triune agreement and decree to create and control all that is. What ultimately distinguishes one thing from another is God's determination in creation. As we will see, because the "counsel of God" is the counsel of the *triune* God, the problem of the one and the many has its source in the fact that God is both one (in essence) and three (in person).

12. Sir Arthur Eddington (1882–1944) was one of the most famous astrophysicists of the twentieth century. As Van Til notes in the next footnote, Eddington's ichthyologist analogy is found in his *Philosophy of Physical Science*, which published lectures originally given in 1938. The purpose of those lectures was to deal with scientific epistemology.

13. Arthur Eddington, *The Philosophy of Physical Science* (Cambridge: University Press, 1939), 16.

only fish that exist for him are those he has caught in his net. He makes bold to say "What my net can't catch isn't fish." That is to say, description is patternization. It is an act of definition. It is a statement of the *what* as well as of the *that*. It is a statement of connotation as well as of denotation. Description itself is explanation.[14]

Current scientific description is not merely explanation, but it is definitely anti-Christian explanation. Current scientific methodology wants to be anti-metaphysical.[15] It claims to make no pronouncements about the nature of reality as a whole. On the surface it seems to be very modest. In fact, however, current scientific methodology does make a pronouncement about the nature of Reality as a whole. When Eddington's "ichthyologist" says he is not interested in an "objective kingdom of fishes" he is not quite honest with himself. He is very much interested that that "objective kingdom of fishes" shall serve as the source of supply for his scientifically recognized fishes. Some of those "objective" fishes must permit of being graduated into fishes that have scientific standing. Some of them at least must be *catchable*. So the "facts," that is the "objective" facts, if they are to become facts that have scientific standing, must be *patternable*. But to be patternable for the modern scientist these "facts" must be absolutely formless. That is to say they must be utterly pliable. They must be like the water that is to be transformed into ice-cubes by the modern refrigerator.[16]

The scientist, even when he claims to be merely describing facts, assumes that at least some aspects of Reality are *non-structural* in nature. His assumption is broader than that. He really assumes that all Reality is non-structural in nature. To make a batch of ice-cubes Mother needs only a small quantity of water. But to hold

14. In the context of Eddington's argument, the net of the ichthyologist both defines and explains what "fish" are. If one were to ask about sea creatures that had gills and were less than two inches long, by the ichthyologist's definition, those could not be fish because his net could not catch them. So, as Van Til notes, explanation is reduced to definition, and connotation is reduced to denotation. The very definition of a thing is its meaning.

15. That is, current scientific methodology wants to explain the "facts" without reference to anything ultimate or to anything that would transcend the "facts" and give them their meaning.

16. Van Til's point here is that the fish that the ichthyologist defines and explains by his two criteria must have come from somewhere; they must have been somewhere prior to their description and explanation, when "caught" by the ichthyologist. Wherever they are, however, they can have no definition (hence, Van Til's notion of "formless") and can, therefore, be defined and explained according to any criteria the scientist chooses (hence, Van Til's notion of "pliable"). Like water transformed into ice cubes, they have neither form nor definition until such is imposed on them by outside factors.

the ice-cubes intact till it is time to serve refreshments, Mother must control the whole situation. She must be certain that Johnny does not meanwhile handle them for purposes of his own. So the scientist, if his description of even a small area, or of an aspect or a dimension, of Reality is to stand, must assume that Reality as a whole is non-structural in nature until it is structured by the scientist. The idea of brute, that is utterly uninterpreted, "fact" is the presupposition to the finding of any fact of scientific standing.[17] A "fact" does not become a fact, according to the modern scientist's assumptions, till it has been made a fact by the ultimate definitory power of the mind of man. The modern scientist, pretending to be merely a describer of facts, is in reality a maker of facts. He makes facts as he describes. His description is itself the manufacturing of facts. He requires "material" to make facts, but the material he requires must be *raw* material. Anything else will break his machinery. The datum is not primarily *given*, but is primarily *taken*.[18]

It appears then that a universal judgment about the nature of all existence is presupposed even in the "description" of the modern scientist. It appears further that this universal judgment negates the heart of the Christian-theistic point of view.[19] According to any consistently Christian position, God, and God only, has ultimate definitory power. God's description or plan of the fact

17. The notion of "brute fact" is one that has been misunderstood in Van Til's theology and apologetics. It is sometimes thought that Van Til's point was that, since there are no brute facts, all facts are what they are by virtue of our interpretation of them. This, however, has more to do with postmodern relativism, and nothing to do with Van Til's view of fact. For Van Til, a brute fact is a mute fact. That is, it is a fact that does not "say" anything; it has no meaning unless and until a person, a scientist in this case, gives meaning to it. Thus, according to Van Til, there are no brute facts. But the reason there are no brute facts is not that every fact carries our interpretation with it. To think that way is to fall prey to relativism. For Van Til, there are no brute facts because every fact is a created fact. As created, therefore, every fact carries with it God's own interpretation. He speaks the facts into existence, and he speaks through that which he has created. But non-Christian science will not countenance any idea of the creation of facts by God.

18. The references to "*raw*" material and to a datum that is primarily "*taken*" are different ways of describing the antimetaphysical posture of science. Since facts are thought to be "brute" facts, they can have no meaning until they are defined by science; they can have no structure until it is determined by the scientist. So facts can only be what they are when the scientist describes and delineates what they are. Prior to that description, they are simply "there" for the taking. This view has its roots in Immanuel Kant, who effectively eliminated the metaphysical as a source or ground of meaning.

19. This is a crucial point to grasp in Van Til's apologetic. Once science assumes the notion of "brute" facts, it has, as well, made a universal statement that facts are not what Christianity claims they are, namely, evidence and revelation of the true God.

makes the fact what it is. What the modern scientist ascribes to the mind of man Christianity ascribes to God. True, the Christian claims that God did not even need a formless stuff for the creation of facts. But this point does not nullify the contention that what the Christian ascribes to God the modern scientist, even when engaged in mere description, virtually ascribes to man. Two Creators, one real, the Other would-be, stand in mortal combat against one another; the self-contained triune God of Christianity and the *homo noumenon*, the autonomous man of Immanuel Kant, cannot both be ultimate.[20]

We conclude then that when both parties, the believer and the non-believer, are epistemologically self-conscious and as such engaged in the interpretative enterprise, they cannot be said to have any fact in common.[21] On the other hand, it must be asserted that they have every fact in common. Both deal with the same God and with the same universe created by God. Both are made in the image of God. In short, they have the metaphysical situation in common. Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common.[22]

Christians and non-Christians have opposing philosophies of fact. They also have opposing philosophies of law. They differ on the nature of diversity; they also differ on the nature of unity. Corresponding to the notion of brute force is the notion of abstract impersonal law, and

20. Kant's philosophy is difficult to summarize. As stated in footnote 18, Kant's philosophy is behind the antimetaphysical bias of secular science. The *homo noumenon* of Kant's philosophy is autonomous man because it is the *real* self, independent of all phenomenal limits.

21. The important notion of being "epistemologically self-conscious" will often be repeated in Van Til's discussion of common grace and apologetics. Note how Van Til qualifies the situation: "*when* both parties are epistemologically self-conscious, and *as such* engaged in the interpretive enterprise." Van Til is careful to make clear that the differences that obtain between the Christian and the non-Christian come to the fore to the extent that both parties are aware of, and explicit about, their epistemological and interpretive differences. If one is not epistemologically self-conscious, that does not mean that such differences do not obtain; it only means that they are not as clear.

22. It is necessary to highlight this statement and to keep it in mind, since so many who misunderstand Van Til either are unaware of it or ignore it altogether. *Metaphysically*, Christians have all things in common with non-Christians, in that all have the same triune God, live in the same created world, have all been created in the image of God, etc. *Epistemologically*, however, they have nothing in common, in that the non-Christian will interpret all things without reference to the true God and his creation. For the non-Christian, the counsel of God and his plan are automatically excluded at the outset of any and all interpretation of reality. As stated in the previous footnote, this epistemological motive is explicit to the extent that there is epistemological self-consciousness.

corresponding to the notion of God-interpreted fact is the notion of God-interpreted law. Among non-Christian philosophers there are various notions as to the foundation of the universals of human experience. Some would find this foundation "objectively," in the universe. Others would find it "subjectively," in man. But all agree, by implication at least, that it must not be found where the Christian finds it—in the counsel of God. The non-Christian scientist would feel hampered were he to hold to a Christian philosophy of fact. He would feel himself to be limited in the number, and in the kind of facts that he might consider. So also the non-Christian scientist would feel hampered were he to hold a Christian philosophy of law. To him this would introduce the notion of caprice into science. Law, he feels, must be something that has nothing to do with personality. When Socrates asked Euthyphro whether "the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved by the gods," he sought to make plain that all law must, in the nature of the case, be above all personality.[23] To find the essence of something we must, argues Socrates, go beyond what anybody thinks of a thing. To say that the gods love the holy is not to give us an insight into the essence of holiness. It is, as the Scholastics would say, merely to give an extrinsic definition of holiness. The *Good*, the *True* and the *Beautiful* as abstract principles, hovering above all gods and men—these are the universals of non-Christian thought.[24] Even so-called personalist philosophies[25]

23. Van Til is quoting from Plato's *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates is inquiring about the nature of the holy (or the good). If the "holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy," then holiness (or goodness) is ultimate; the *cause* of the gods loving it is in the holiness itself. If, on the other hand, something is "holy because it is beloved by the gods," then it is the gods who are ultimate, and what they determine to be holy is holy (or good).

24. Plato held that such ideas as the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and not the gods, were ultimate. They are "abstract principles" because they are, by definition, impersonal. They have their origin in themselves, not in some person.

25. Van Til was interested in, and interacted with, personalist philosophy throughout his career. As he says in his lecture (see below), personalism was both a theology and a philosophy, and it has its roots in modern Methodist theology. Van Til's earliest published interaction with it was in a book review of Albert Knudson's *Doctrine of God*, in 1930 (*Christianity Today* 1, no. 8 [December 1930]: 10–13). The definition of it that Van Til seemed to work with was given by Knudson in his *Philosophy of Personalism* (New York: Abingdon, 1927), 87: "In the light of these facts we may define personalism as *that form of idealism which gives equal recognition to both the pluralistic and monistic aspects of experience and which finds in the conscious unity, identity, and free activity of personality the key to the nature of reality and the solution of the ultimate problems of philosophy*." This quotation, and one of Van Til's interactions with personalism, can be found in "Boston Personalism," a lecture delivered to the faculty of the Boston University School of Theology on March 6, 1956 (unpublished). See also Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 62–64, 78–79.

like those of Bowne,[26] Knudsen [sic],[27] Brightman,[28] Flewelling[29] and others, are still impersonalist in the end.[30] Whether in science, in philosophy or in religion, the non-Christian always seeks for a daysman betwixt or above God and himself, as the final court of appeal.

Believer and non-believer have opposite philosophies of fact and opposite philosophies of law.[31] They also have, behind both of these, opposite views of man. Corresponding to the idea of brute fact and impersonal law is the idea of the autonomous man.[32] Corresponding to the idea of God-controlled fact and law is the idea of God-controlled man. The idea of creation out of nothing is not found either in Greek or in modern philosophy. The causal creation idea is obnoxious even to such critics of the classical-modern view

26. Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910), a Methodist theologian and Boston personalist, received his B.A. (1871) and M.A. (1876) from New York University. He became a professor of philosophy at Boston University in 1876 and taught there for thirty years. He is most well known for his book *Metaphysics: A Study in First Principles* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882).

27. Albert C. Knudson (1873-1953) received an A.B. from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (1893), and an S.T.B. and Ph.D. from Boston University (1896; 1900), where he was presumably a student of Bowne. He did not teach at Boston University immediately after graduating, but later taught at their school of theology.

28. Edgar S. Brightman (1884–1953) earned his B.A. in 1906 and his M.A. in 1908, both from Brown University, and his Ph.D. from Boston University in 1912. He edited Knudson's Festschrift entitled *Personalism in Theology: A Symposium in Honor of Albert Cornelius Knudson* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1943).

29. Ralph Tyler Flewelling (1871–1960) studied at the University of Michigan, Alma College, and also at Garrett Biblical Institute (Evanston, IL) and Boston University (Ph.D., 1909). He became professor and chair of the department of philosophy at the University of Southern California, and in 1918 was appointed the chair of philosophy at the American Expeditionary Forces University in Beaune, France. He was ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1896. Flewelling was the founder and editor of the philosophical journal *The Personalist*, which he started in 1920; it was renamed *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* in 1980.

30. To see why personalism is "still impersonalist in the end," see Van Til, "Boston Personalism," cited above. In sum, the focus on man's personality in personalism devolves into a focus on *abstract* human personality. Any focus on something abstract is, by definition, "impersonalist in the end." This harks back to Van Til's emphasis on "concrete thinking."

31. The believer affirms that facts and laws are created and controlled by God, but not so the unbeliever.

32. These three categories—brute fact, impersonal law, and autonomous man—are central to Van Til's entire apologetic, and they are, in various ways and with varying emphases, presupposed by any and all who reject Christianity. The extent to which one is aware of such presuppositions depends on the extent to which one is "epistemologically self-conscious." Brute facts are facts without meaning unless and until man gives them an interpretation; they are the antithesis of created facts, in and thorough which God speaks. The notion of impersonal law assumes that reality (or at least aspects of it) has a law-like structure, which no personal being maintains or controls. Autonomous man assumes that one is neither created nor governed by God, but is a law unto oneself. Understanding these three categories as the basic presuppositions of all non-Christians provides significant insight into much of what Van Til wants to argue.

as Cochrane, Reinhold Niebuhr[33] and the dialectical theologians.[34] Only the orthodox thinker holds to the creation idea. Accordingly only the orthodox thinker finds himself compelled to challenge the whole of classic-modern methodology.

Even so we are driven to make further limitations. Roman Catholics have taken no clear-cut position on the question of creation. They divide the field of factual research between autonomous Reason and Faith. "The natural" is said to be the territory of Reason and "the supernatural" is said to be the territory of Faith. In the territory of Reason believers and non-believers are said to have no difference. The question whether the mind of man is created or is not created, we are told in effect, need not be raised in this area. Rome is willing, in what it calls the field of Reason, to employ the ideas of brute fact, of abstract impersonal law and autonomous man, not merely for argument's sake, but without qualification.[35]

Arminians have, by and large, adopted a similar position. It is but natural that they should. Their theology allows for autonomy in man at the point of salvation.[36] Their philosophy, running in the same channel, ascribes autonomy to man in other fields.

It is therefore in Reformed thinking alone that we may expect to find anything like a consistently Christian philosophy of history. Romanism and Arminianism have virtually allowed that God's counsel need not always and everywhere be taken as our principle of individuation. This is to give license to would-be autonomous man, permitting him to interpret reality apart from God. Reformed think-

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33. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was a contemporary of Van Til and a highly influential neoorthodox theologian and pastor. The son of German immigrants, Niebuhr studied at Eden Theological Seminary and earned a bachelor of divinity from Yale Divinity School.

34. Among "dialectical theologians," Van Til certainly has in mind Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Emil Brunner (1889–1966). *Dialectical theology*, generally speaking, is another term for *neoorthodoxy* (also sometimes called the "theology of crisis"—see below), which seeks to affirm by way of negation and paradox. Paradox, as Van Til will discuss below, is really contradictory in dialectical theology. For example, in his commentary on Romans, Barth claims that God is to be understood as "the nonbeing of the world." For more on Barth and Brunner, see Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947).

35. Van Til is referring here to the method employed by Thomas Aquinas and integral to Romanist dogma, which assumes a "natural" realm, in which there are no significant differences between a believer's and an unbeliever's use of reason, and a realm of "grace," in which those differences obtain. This "nature-grace" method of Romanism (and much evangelicalism) compromises biblical truth.

36. Because Arminian theology holds that, for man to choose freely, God must not be sovereign over that choice, Arminians allow for autonomy in a way that is similar to Romanists.

ing, in contrast with this, has taken the doctrine of total depravity seriously. It knows that he who is dead in trespasses and sins lives in the valley of the blind, while yet he insists that he alone dwells in the light. It knows that the natural man receives not the things of God, whether in the field of science or in the field of religion. The Reformed believer knows that he himself has been taken out of a world of misinterpretation and placed in the world of truth by the initiative of God. He has had his own interpretation challenged at every point and is ready now, in obedience to God, to challenge the thinking and acting of sinful man at every place. He marvels that God has borne with him in his God-ignoring and therefore God-insulting endeavors in the field of philosophy and science as well as in the field of religion. He therefore feels compelled to challenge the interpretation the non-Christian gives, not merely of religion but of all other things as well.

The significance of our discussion on fact, law and reason for the construction of a Christian philosophy of history may now be pointed out explicitly. The philosophy of history inquires into the meaning of history. To use a phrase of Kierkegaard, we ask how the Moment *is to have significance*. Our claim as believers is that the Moment cannot intelligently be shown to have any significance except upon the presupposition of the biblical doctrine of the ontological trinity.[37] In the ontological trinity there is complete harmony between an equally ultimate one and many. The persons of the trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another and of God's nature. It is the absolute equality in point of ultimacy that requires all the emphasis we can give it. Involved in this absolute equality is complete interdependence; God is our concrete universal.[38]

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37. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is sometimes called the "father of existentialism." For him, "the Moment" (*ØjeblikketØjeblikket*) to which Van Til refers is the point (e.g., of decision) at which eternity and time intersect. In other words, "the Moment" was an attempt to give significance to the many aspects of reality (i.e., decisions) by way of the one (i.e., eternity).

By "ontological Trinity," Van Til means the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as he is *in himself*, and quite apart from his relationship to, and activity in, the world.

38. The term *concrete universal* comes from Hegelianism, which, in reaction to Kant's abstract universal, posited a universal that was embedded in reality, and which was in dialectic tension (between Being and Nonbeing). A concrete universal in Hegel's thought is that which is real and which includes everything in its scope. Van Til posits the true and triune God as our "concrete universal" (1) in order to speak to the philosophers in their own language, and, more importantly, (2) because God alone can transcend the reality and particulars of history, all the while being present in it to give it its true foundation and meaning.

We accept this God upon Scriptural authority. In the Bible alone do we hear of such a God. Such a God, to be known at all, cannot be known otherwise than by virtue of His own voluntary revelation. He must therefore be known for what He is, and known to the extent that He is known, by authority alone. We do not first set out without God to find our highest philosophical concept in terms of which we think we can interpret reality and then call this highest concept divine. This was, as Windelband tells us, the process of the Greeks.[39] This has been the process of all non-Christian thought. It is from this process of reasoning that we have been redeemed. On such a process of reasoning only a finite god can be discovered. It has been the nemesis of the history of the theistic proofs that this has been so frequently forgotten. Are we then left with a conflict between Faith and Reason? Have we no philosophical justification for the Christian position? Or are we to find a measure of satisfaction in the fact that others too, non-Christian scientists and philosophers as well as ourselves, have in the end to allow for some mystery in their system?

To all this we must humbly but confidently reply by saying that we have the best of philosophical justification for our position. It is not as though we are in a bad way and that we must seek for some comfort from others who are also in a bad way. We as Christians alone have a position that is philosophically defensible. The frank acceptance of our position on authority, which at first blush, because of our inveterate tendency to think along non-Christian lines, seems to involve the immediate and total rejection of all philosophy—this frank acceptance of authority is, philosophically, our very salvation. Psychologically, acceptance on authority precedes philosophical argument; but when, as epistemologically self-conscious grown-ups, we look into our own position, we discover that unless we may presuppose such a God as we have accepted on authority, the Moment will have no significance. The God that the philosophers of the ages have been looking for, a God in whom unity and diversity are equally ultimate, the "Unknown God," is known to us by grace. It has been the quest of the ages to find an interpretative concept such as has been given us by grace.

39. W. Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. James H. Tufts, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 34.

With this we might conclude our brief survey of the principles of a Christian philosophy of history. It is well, however, that we give further consideration to the modern notions of paradox and the limiting concept. Doing so will perhaps enable us to relate our own position more definitely to current speculation. Doing so may also prepare us for a better appreciation of the difficulties facing us when we deal with such questions as those with which we are concerned in the problem of common grace.

Paradox

Our position is naturally charged with being self-contradictory. It might seem at first glance as though we were willing, with the dialectical theologians, to accept the really contradictory. Yet such is not the case. In fact we hold that our position is the only position that saves one from the necessity of ultimately accepting the really contradictory. We argue that unless we may hold to the presupposition of the self-contained ontological trinity, human rationality itself is a mirage. But to hold to this position requires us to say that while we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory we embrace with passion the idea of the *apparently* contradictory. It is through the latter alone that we can reject the former. If it is the self-contained ontological trinity that we need for the rationality of our interpretation of life, it is this same ontological trinity that requires us to hold to the apparently contradictory.[40] This ontological trinity is, as the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards puts it, "incomprehensible." God dwells in light that no man can approach unto. This holds of His rationality as well as of His being, inasmuch as His being and His self-consciousness are coterminous. It follows that in everything with which we deal we are, in the last analysis, dealing with this infinite God, this God who hideth Himself, this mysterious God. In everything that we handle

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40. When Van Til states that "we embrace with passion the idea of the *apparently* contradictory," he means that we must embrace with passion the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and all that it entails. That doctrine is beyond our ability fully to comprehend, yet only by standing on the authority of God's revelation, and not our own reason, are we able to make sense of the world at all. His point, here, is to highlight that there are only two places on which one can stand with respect to knowledge—we either stand on God's authority in his revelation, or we stand on our own reason. The latter, Van Til makes clear, will end up destroying that same "reason" that we think is our foundation.

we deal finally with the incomprehensible God. Everything that we handle depends for what it is upon the counsel of the infinitely inexhaustible God. At every point we run into mystery. All our ingenuity will not aid us in seeking to avoid this mystery. All our ingenuity cannot exhaust the humanly inexhaustible rationality of God. To seek to present the Christian position as rationally explicable in the sense of being comprehensible to the mind of man is to defeat our own purposes. To do so we must adopt the standard of reasoning of our opponent, and when we have accepted the standard of reasoning of our opponent, we must rest content with the idea of a finite God.

To the non-Christian our position may be compared to the idea of adding water to a bucket that is already full of water. "Your idea of the self-sufficient ontological trinity," he will say, "is like a bucket full of water. To God nothing can be added. He cannot derive glory from His creatures. Yet your idea of history is like pouring water into the full bucket. Everything in it is said to add to the glory of God."

No Christian can answer this full-bucket difficulty in such a way as to satisfy the demands of a non-Christian epistemology. We can and must maintain that the Christian position is the only position that does not destroy reason itself. But this is not to say that the relation between human responsibility and the counsel of God is not *apparently* contradictory. That all things in history are determined by God must always seem, at first sight, to contradict the genuineness of my choice. That the elect are certainly saved for eternity must always *seem* to make the threat of eternal punishment unreal with respect to them. That the reprobate are certainly to be lost must always *seem* to make the presentation of eternal life unreal with respect to them.[41]

The Limiting Concept

If we hold to a theology of the apparently paradoxical we must also hold, by consequence, to the Christian notion of a *limiting concept*. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept has been

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41. Van Til is elaborating on his point above that "at every point we run into mystery." Just exactly how a triune God who is altogether independent, eternal, and infinite can, really and sincerely, interact with his creation will always be mysterious to us; his ways are past finding out (see Rom. 11:33–36).

developed on the basis of the non-Christian conception of mystery. By contrast we may think of the Christian notion of the limiting concept as based upon the Christian conception of mystery. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of would-be autonomous man who seeks to legislate for all reality, but bows before the irrational as that which he has not yet rationalized. The Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of the creature who seeks to set forth in systematic form something of the revelation of the Creator.[42]

The Christian church has, consciously or unconsciously, employed the notion of the limiting concept in the formulation of its creeds. In these creeds the church does not pretend to have enveloped the fullness of the revelation of God. The church knows itself to be dealing with the inexhaustible God. The creeds must therefore be regarded as "approximations" to the fullness of truth as it is in God. This idea of the creeds as approximations to the fullness of the truth as it is in God must be set over against the modern notion of the creeds as approximation to abstract truth. The modern notion of approximation is based on the modern notion of the limiting concept. The modern notion of systematic logical interpretation as approximation is therefore based on ultimate skepticism with respect to the existence of any such thing as universally valid truth. The modern notion implies doubt as to whether any intellectual statement of any sort may be true at all. It is really no more than a hope, and that a false hope as we must believe, that there is in human interpretation an approximation to the truth. The Christian idea on the other hand rests upon the presupposition of the existence of God as the self-contained Being that Scripture presents to us. The Christian idea is therefore the recognition that the creature

42. For more on "limiting concept," see the foreword. The notion of a "limiting concept" is borrowed from philosophy, specifically from Immanuel Kant. In Kant's philosophy, there is much that can, presumably, be known by us in the phenomenal world. But there are other things that have to be posited, which cannot be known; Kant includes these as concepts of the "noumenal" realm. The noumenal things that are necessary (according to Kant), but nevertheless unknowable, are limiting concepts. The notion of *limiting* concepts presupposes Kant's agnosticism with respect to our knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the noumenal realm. For Van Til, a limiting concept is that which is, at one and the same time, determined and defined by another limiting concept. Thus, the doctrine of election is a limiting concept with respect to our real and legitimate choices. It should be remembered that limiting concepts are not necessarily on a par with each other. God's election precedes our choices. Given creation, however, one (freedom) is best understood in the context of the other (election).

can only touch the hem of the garment of Him who dwells in light that no man can approach unto.[43]

If we have not altogether failed of our purpose, our discussion of the principles of a Christian philosophy of history will help us materially in understanding the literature that deals with common grace. In the first place it ought to enable those who affirm, and those who deny common grace to be conscious of the fact that only in Reformed circles could the question have arisen at all. Roman Catholics and Arminians could not be interested in the subject. Only those who are seriously concerned with interpreting the whole of history in terms of the counsel of God can be puzzled by the question of that which is "common" between believer and unbeliever. For both the Roman Catholic and the Arminian it is a foregone conclusion that there are large areas of life on which the believer and the unbeliever agree without any difference. Only he who is committed to the basic absolute of God's counsel can, and will, be puzzled by the meaning of the relative.[44]

The same thing must be said with respect to the Theology of Crisis. Of the dialectical theologians Barth claims to accept, and Brunner claims to reject, the doctrine of reprobation, but Barth no more than Brunner accepts this doctrine in the orthodox sense of the term. Hence their debate about creation-ordinances and common grace—Brunner affirming and Barth denying their relevancy to theology—has nothing except phraseology in common with the problem of common grace as discussed by orthodox theologians.[45] No one, we believe, can be seriously concerned with the question of common grace unless he seeks to be truly Reformed in his interpretation of life. Calvin, called the originator, and Kuyper, the great modern exponent, of the doctrine of common grace, were primarily concerned, in the whole thrust of their endeavor, to bring men

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43. That is, when we confess that God is "infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible," as we do in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 2.1, we can know that what we confess is true because it is grounded in God's own revelation of himself, but we cannot plumb the depths of what these characteristics of God are in himself. For Kant, for example, what we can know about the phenomenal world is an "approximation," in that we can never know what that world really is; the "world-in-itself" is, by definition, hidden from us. Skepticism is the natural result of such approximations.

44. This is a tremendously significant point. A theology that confesses some kind of commonality between Christian and non-Christian will not see the need for a biblical doctrine of God's common grace; only in a Reformed context can such a doctrine find its home.

45. For more on this, see Van Til, *The New Modernism*.

face to face with the sovereign God. On the other hand, those who have recently denied common grace have done so, once more, in the interest of bringing men face to face with the sovereign God.[46]

In the second place, our discussion on the philosophy of history ought to make us realize that a question such as that of common grace admits of no easy and simple solution. We shall need to keep ourselves aware of the fact that we all need to employ the limiting concept, and that every statement of the truth is an approximation to the fullness of truth as it exists in God. Like the first point, this point, too, is a reason for common humility and mutual forbearance.

In the third place, our discussion ought to make us not only sympathetic in our understanding both of the work of those who have affirmed, and of those who have denied, common grace, but also critical of their efforts. We now have something of a criterion by which to judge whether men in their affirmation, or in their denial, of common grace have worked along lines that are really in accord with the Reformed Faith. The solution of the common grace problem, to the extent that it is to be found at all, must be found by looking more steadfastly into the face of God. To what extent have those that have engaged in the debate on common grace kept this point in mind? Have they sometimes allowed themselves to go astray along the by-paths of Parmenides, Heraclitus or Plato?[47] If we are even to *understand* the writings of Kuyper and others on the subject of common grace we must be both sympathetic and critical. How much the more then, if we are to *profit* by their work, should we both appreciate the good and avoid the mistakes they may have made?

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46. Van Til is referring here to Herman Hoeksema and his followers.

47. Parmenides and Heraclitus were fifth-century B.C. pre-Socratic philosophers. Plato (429–347 B.C.) worked out his philosophy partly in reaction to, and dependence upon, the pre-Socratics. Van Til singles out these three philosophers because they represent three different notions of the problem of the one and the many, especially with respect to "Being" and "Knowledge." Heraclitus taught that all is in flux, so that whatever "is" and is "known" changes from moment to moment; all is "many." Parmenides, perhaps in reaction to Heraclitus, taught that Being is One, so that whatever was thought to be diverse was denied; all is "one." Plato sought to develop a middle position between these two. For Plato, Being can be either actual or potential. It is not necessary to choose either the static (Parmenides) or the flux (Heraclitus); his potentiality-actuality scheme seeks to include them both.

WHAT POINT OF CONTACT does the Christian have with
the world in order to bring the biblical message to the nonbeliever?
How can the doctrines of election and total depravity be reconciled with human
responsibility and the universal offer of the gospel? Does our Lord show favor to
saint and sinner alike?

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—JOHN M. FRAME
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