

# ANALOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: A SYSTEMATIC INTERPRETATION OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL'S THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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## 1. Introduction

WILLIAM D. DENNISON in his 1995 article, "Analytic Philosophy and Van Til's Epistemology," argued that Cecil De Boer, Jesse De Boer, and John M. Frame misunderstood the epistemology of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987).<sup>1</sup> The De Boers endeavored to make sense of Van Til's epistemology by examining his terminology and its historic philosophical usage.<sup>2</sup> This led them to interpret Van Til according to a philosophical tradition he openly opposed: idealism.<sup>3</sup> Frame followed, in Dennison's view, a more commendable route amongst Van Til scholars as Frame recognized that Van Til's epistemology is inherently biblical, even though Van Til employed idealist terminology. Frame attempted to advance Van Til's thought, while cleaning up his complex idealistic language for philosophical clarity and the practical purposes of the church.<sup>4</sup> Still, Dennison pointed out, what resulted in Frame's case was a perspectival epistemology that neglected the "main rubric of Van Til's own epistemology—the philosophy of history."<sup>5</sup> In Dennison's estimation, the De Boers and Frame implemented

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1. William D. Dennison, "Analytic Philosophy and Van Til's Epistemology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995), 33–34.

2. *Ibid.*, 35–36.

3. For example, Van Til states in the preface to his book *Christianity and Idealism*: "Christianity teaches man to worship and serve God the Creator. Idealism, no less than materialism or pragmatism, teaches man to serve and worship the creature" (Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* [Philadelphia: P&R, 1955], preface). For more works responding to the charge that Van Til was an idealist see Lane G. Tipton, "The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004), 84–87; Timothy I. McConnell, "The Influence of Idealism on the Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 3 (September 2005): 557–88; Ernest Robert Holloway, "Van Til and Idealism: The Influence of Idealism on the Philosophical Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til" (Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998); and K. Scott Oliphint, "The Consistency of Van Til's Methodology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 27–49.

4. Dennison, "Van Til's Epistemology," 42.

5. *Ibid.*, 43.

analytic philosophical methods of interpretation that were inadequate to comprehend the holistic, redemptive-historical structure of Van Til's epistemology.<sup>6</sup> Dennison concluded, "Herein lies the crux of the problem: both the De Boers and Frame failed to perceive the importance and centrality of the 'story' of Scripture (redemptive history) in Van Til's epistemology."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, according to Dennison, to recognize the centrality of redemptive history in Van Til's epistemology is to perceive nothing less than the influence of Van Til's biblical theology professor at Princeton, Geerhardus Vos.<sup>8</sup>

Although Dennison's article showed the fundamental nexus between Vos and Van Til, a comprehensive study of Van Til's epistemology relative to Vos's biblical theology and to Reformed dogmatics more generally extended beyond the scope of Dennison's examination and has yet to be tackled by Van Til scholars.<sup>9</sup> The present article will attempt to fill this gap in Van Til scholarship by presenting a systematic exposition of Van Til's theory of human knowledge of creation. The ensuing study will examine a broad cross-section of Van Til's works wherein he most clearly defines and links the facets of his theory of knowledge. If this venture is successful, it will elucidate Van Til's epistemology through observing the conceptual units of his thought as they are couched in his project for a Reformed redemptive-historical philosophy—a *Christian philosophy of history*—as a whole. Sections 2 and 3 will address two elements of Van Til's philosophy of history, his doctrine of God and creation as well as his philosophy of revelation, noting their implications for Van Til's episte-

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6. *Ibid.*, 35, 43, 48–49.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. *Ibid.* Geerhardus Vos made an indelible impression on Van Til's personal and academic life. Vos was the first person Van Til remembered meeting upon his arrival at Princeton Seminary in 1922 (John R Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008], 50). Van Til kept a close relationship with Vos, and eventually conducted Vos's funeral on August 17, 1949 (*Ibid.*, 131). Van Til described Vos as his most beloved teacher (Cornelius Van Til, "Christianity and Culture: Pro Rege: For the King - Part: 2" [lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pa., n.d.], 18:05) and the greatest pedagogue he ever sat under (James T. Dennison, Jr., "Geerhardus Vos: Life Between Two Worlds," *Kerux* 14, no. 2 [September 1999], 19).

9. More than any other Van Til scholar, however, Dennison has produced material on the relationship between Van Til's thought and Vos's biblical theology. See William D. Dennison, *In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. James Douglas Baird; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016) and William D. Dennison, *Paul's Two-Age Construction and Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000). Gabriel Nourse Emil Fluhrer's dissertation, "Reasoning by Presupposition: Clarifying and Applying the Center of Van Til's Apologetic" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2015), is also noteworthy because it relates Van Til's presuppositionalism to Vos's biblical theology. There are some striking similarities between chapter 5 of Fluhrer's dissertation and the present article, but we arrived at our conclusions separately.

mology where appropriate. Section 4 will directly focus on Van Til's epistemology in light of Sections 2 and 3.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Van Til's Doctrine of God and Creation

### 2.1. The Ontological and Economical Trinity

Basic to Van Til's doctrine of God is the distinction between the ontological and the economical Trinity. This irreducible difference controls, explicitly or implicitly, all of Van Til's formulations in his theology proper—and Van Til's theology proper controls all of his formulations in his thought as a whole.<sup>11</sup> By speaking of the ontological Trinity, Van Til referred to God as he exists immutably, eternally, and personally in complete trinitarian self-sufficient independence from creation. The ontological Trinity is “distinguished from the economical Trinity,” or the persons of the Godhead as they condescend to relate to the created order.<sup>12</sup> The economic Trinity refers to “the triune God” as “active with respect to the universe,” while the ontological Trinity refers to God “as active within himself.”<sup>13</sup> These two trinitarian concepts are, in Van Til's vernacular, limiting concepts, “[concepts] that should never be employed to do duty by [themselves].”<sup>14</sup> The Christian must hold that God is *both* completely self-sufficient in himself *and* that he condescends to decree, create, control, redeem, and consummate. Neither the ontological nor the economical concept is sufficient *by itself* to explain the triune God of Christianity. The Christian God is not only self-sufficient, but, by virtue of his free decision, he is also in a relationship with something *ad extra*—and neither God's intratrinitarian nature nor his freely assumed relationality with creation can be reduced to the other. Since for Van Til these two concepts function as limiting concepts, they are therefore compatible and have a distinct relation. For example, Van Til was explicit that we must think of the “ontological trinity before we think of the economical trinity.”<sup>15</sup> Van Til thought that God as he is in himself is the

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10. Thanks are due to Jonathan Brack, Michael Brown, Thomas Buitter, Nathan Shannon, Gray Sutanto, Brian Van Dyke, Carlton Wynne, and the Covenant College Philosophy Club for providing helpful comments on sections of an earlier draft of the present article. Special thanks are in order to William Davis, William Dennison, Richard Gaffin, Sarah Huffines, Miriam Mindeman, Stephanie Taylor, Lane Tipton, and my wife, Georgia, for reading and critiquing early drafts *in toto* and for providing invaluable encouragement.

11. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint; 4th ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 32.

12. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 29.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God* (ed. William Edgar; 2nd ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 68.

15. Van Til, *Defense*, 37.

necessary presupposition for God as he acts in respect to creation. To put it another way, for Van Til, the ontological Trinity provides the ground for a Christian philosophy of history. As K. Scott Oliphint states, “The ontological precedes, determines, guides, and regulates the historical and the temporal. Or, to put it in Van Tilian vernacular, the ontological Trinity is the presupposition behind everything else, including history, and including redemptive history.”<sup>16</sup> God’s immutable, self-contained trinitarian essence is the foundation for what God does in relation to creation. In Van Til’s words, the “concept of the counsel of God according to which all things in the created world are regulated” is based “upon this notion of the ontological trinity and consistent with it.”<sup>17</sup> So, as we consider Van Til’s philosophy of history, we must keep in mind how Van Til construed the ontological Trinity as the metaphysical foundation for the decretive, creative, providential, redemptive, and eschatological activity of the economical Trinity.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2. God’s Necessary Knowledge and Free Knowledge

Van Til, with the Reformed orthodox tradition,<sup>19</sup> recognized that God has necessary knowledge and free knowledge. God’s necessary knowledge is the exhaustive self-knowledge God has irrespective of his decree. In Van Til’s words, “God’s knowledge of himself may further be spoken of as *necessary* knowledge. He himself exists as a necessary being. His knowledge of himself is therefore necessary in the sense that it is knowledge of himself as a necessarily existing being.”<sup>20</sup> Necessary knowledge is ontological knowledge, knowledge God has irrespective of creation or his free determination. God’s free knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge God has of creation, knowledge which is grounded in and coterminous with his free eternal decree. As Louis Berkhof states, God’s free knowledge of creation is “founded on God’s infinite knowledge of his own all-comprehensive and unchangeable eternal purpose.”<sup>21</sup> God’s free knowledge is the knowledge God has of all things actual, past, present, and future, in light of his will for creation. In Van Til’s words, “God knows all things beyond himself with one act of vision of his own plan with respect to

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16. K. Scott Oliphint, “Something Much Too Plain To Say,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 199.

17. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 128.

18. Van Til made the even bolder claim that the ontological Trinity is “basic to all the doctrines of Christian theism,” and “ultimately controls a truly Christian methodology” (Van Til, *Apologetics*, 128).

19. See Richard A. Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 411–32.

20. Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 373. Emphasis in original.

21. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (New Combined Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 67.

those things.”<sup>22</sup> Free knowledge is economic knowledge; it is knowledge God has because of his eternal plan for whatsoever comes to pass with respect to creation. God’s self-knowledge is by virtue of his being (ontological), and God’s knowledge of creation is by virtue of his free and eternal will for the facts of creation (economical).

Van Til referred to both God’s self-knowledge and knowledge of creation as “analytic.”<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant characterized an analytic statement as one in which the predicate is contained in the subject, such that the concept of the predicate is already expressed in the concept of the subject.<sup>24</sup> As in the common example, “All bachelors are unmarried men,” an analytic statement is true because of the meaning of its component concepts, not because of how those concepts relate to the world as experienced. Van Til redefined this Kantian terminology to articulate the classic Reformed conception of God’s knowledge. By *analytic*, Van Til meant that God knows himself and creation exhaustively, independent of anything outside of himself: “God does not need to look beyond himself for additions to his knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Both God’s necessary and God’s free knowledge are analytic because they have as their object ultimately only God himself—in the former, his nature, in the latter, his will—and therefore are only dependent on God and independent of anything outside of God. The two distinct aspects of God’s knowledge are united in his self-sufficient, divine intellect so that, in the words of Bavinck, “the two are organically connected. ... [God] knows all things in and of and by himself. For that reason his knowledge is undivided, simple, unchangeable, eternal. He knows all things instantaneously, simultaneously, from eternity; all things are eternally present to his mind’s eye.”<sup>26</sup> Stated more succinctly by Berkhof, God “knows Himself and all things possible and actual in one eternal and most simple act.”<sup>27</sup> And as Van Til put it, God “knows himself and all created existence by a *single* internal act of intuition.”<sup>28</sup> God’s free (economic) knowing-determination of reality is not divorced from who God is ontologically: God knows creation by his eternal plan, and so knows freely and yet self-sufficiently.

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22. Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 373.

23. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 25–27.

24. In Kant’s words, “Analytical judgments express nothing in the predicate but what has been already actually thought in the concept of the subject, though not so distinctly or with the same (full) consciousness” (Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena To Any Future Metaphysics*, in *Modern Philosophy* [ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann; vol. 3 of *Philosophic Classics*, ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann; 5th ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2008], 544).

25. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 27.

26. Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation* (vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; 4 vols.; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 195–96.

27. Berkhof, *Theology*, 66.

28. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 27. Emphasis added.

### 2.3. God's Free Knowledge and His All-Inclusive Plan

When Van Til spoke of God's analytic knowledge of all facts outside of himself, he indicates that this divine free knowledge is equivalent to God's interpretation or planning of the facts of history: "God knows or interprets the facts before they are facts. *It is God's plan, God's comprehensive interpretation of the facts that makes the facts what they are.*"<sup>29</sup> God's free knowledge is identical to his plan with respect to the entire creation: the two are essentially linked. Therefore, if one posits that the nature, development, and purpose of creation exist independently of God's will, then God's free knowledge is compromised. Van Til argued that if God's will does not determine creation history, then God does not know creation by virtue of his plan; consequently, he must know creation as something autonomous of his own being and purpose. If one holds, however, that God controls whatsoever comes to pass, then there is no problem maintaining the self-sufficiency of the being and knowledge of God: God would then know "all things because he controls all things."<sup>30</sup> Van Til firmly held that God's analytic knowledge of all things implies that God created and controls all things according to his own purpose, and vice versa. Everything that happens in history is brought about by God's providence according to his eternal purpose and so has its source in the self-sufficient, triune God.

### 2.4. Creation and Providence

For Van Til, as God brings about the facts of history, those facts are always covenantally related and in accordance with his eschatological goal. According to Van Til, both the covenantal nature and the eschatological nature of the facts of history express what it means for the absolute God to have free knowledge and, therefore, plan the whole course of creation. First, the covenantal nature of reality can be seen in light of Van Til's representational principle.<sup>31</sup>

The representational principle in reference to the ontological Trinity means that "the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it"<sup>32</sup> so that "there is completely personal relationship without residue."<sup>33</sup> As Charles Hodge asserted before Van Til, the persons of the Trinity exhaustively interpenetrate each other as they equally partake of the one divine essence. Hodge taught that the intimate perichoretic rela-

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29. Ibid. Emphasis in original.

30. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1969), 70.

31. See Van Til, *Epistemology*, chapters 6 and 8 for his full discussion of the representational principle.

32. Ibid., 96.

33. Ibid., 78.

tionship between the three divine persons means that they share “a common intelligence, will and power. ... This fact—of the intimate union, communion, and inhabitation of the persons of the Trinity—is the reason why everywhere in Scripture, and instinctively by all Christians, God as God is addressed as a person, in perfect consistency with the Tripersonality of the Godhead.”<sup>34</sup> Van Til’s representational principle in its ontological significance is his exposition of the classical doctrine of *perichoresis*, as articulated earlier by Hodge. In the Godhead there is a complete, divinely personal environment via the intimate communion between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is the one God. Van Til inferred that “since the whole being of God, if we may in all reverence say so, is built upon the representational plan, it was impossible for God to create except upon the representational plan.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, since God is absolute personality, when he freely chose to create, this creation must be exhaustively personal, too, so that “the surroundings of man are really completely personalized,” and “man’s actions are all personal too.”<sup>36</sup> Further, this absolutely personal nature of all reality is identical with the covenant principle. In Van Til’s mind, Calvinism’s covenant theology captures the expression of God’s trinitarian personal character on his creation. Van Til states,

It was upon this foundation of a truly trinitarian concept that Calvin built his conception of covenant theology. If the Persons of the Trinity are representationally exhaustive of one another, human thought is cast on representational lines too. There would in that case be no other than a completely personalistic atmosphere in which human personality could function. Accordingly, when man faced any fact whatsoever, he would *ipso facto* be face to face with God. It is metaphysically as well as religiously true that man must live and cannot but live *coram deo* always.<sup>37</sup>

God’s personal nature implies that at every point of man’s existence and activity in history, he is a personal-covenantal creature presented before the personal-covenantal presence and requirements of God. Van Til beautifully expressed this principle further, using the analogy of God as an estate owner and the world as his estate:

[The God of Christianity] says the whole world belongs to Him, and that you are His creature, and as such are to own up to

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34. Charles Hodge, *Theology* (vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*; 3 vols.; n.p.: Hendrickson, 2003), 461–62.

35. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 79.

36. *Ibid.*, 78.

37. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 97.

that fact by honoring Him whether you eat or drink or do anything else. God says that you live, as it were, on His estate. And His estate has large ownership signs placed everywhere, so that he who goes by even at seventy miles an hour cannot but read them. Every fact in this world, the God of the Bible claims, has His stamp indelibly engraved upon it. How then could you be neutral with respect to such a God?<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, Van Til held that every fact of created history is not only covenantally, but also—and this has often been missed—*eschatologically* related. Every fact “exists and operates by virtue of the plan of God,” and, for Van Til, the plan of God is decidedly eschatological. God “has planned the end from the beginning,”<sup>39</sup> and “directs all things in the world by a plan to the ends He has in view for them.”<sup>40</sup> God “rules and directs all things” and all things “serve the final purposes of God.”<sup>41</sup> God is the one who “controls and directs the destiny of all things.”<sup>42</sup> In providence God “sustains the universe in order to realize his ultimate purpose with it. ... Every fact within the universe has a purpose, or function to fulfill. ... God is gradually reaching a climax with history. Every event leads up to that climax and contributes to it.”<sup>43</sup> As God’s will determines the nature of the facts, each fact is given a nature suited to fit its function in God’s plan toward God’s intended end. As Van Til put it, the nature of a fact cannot be separated from God’s eschatological plan any more than one can “separate a drop of ink from the ocean.”<sup>44</sup>

Van Til saw the inherently covenantal and eschatological nature of the facts of creation as the answer to a problem that has plagued non-Christian epistemology, particularly since the time of Kant: the problem of the one and the many; the problem of finding real and meaningful relationships between the facts of experience by means of human reason. Van Til asserts:

Reason, which on Kantian basis has presumed to legislate for the whole of reality, needs chance for its existence. If reality were God-structured the human mind could not be ultimately legislative. The idea of brute irrationality is presupposed in modern methodology. At the same time it is this brute irra-

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38. Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (Philadelphia: Great Commission, n.d.), 5.

39. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 76.

40. Van Til, *Why I Believe*, 8.

41. Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1971), 138.

42. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 62.

43. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1978), 94. See also Van Til, *Apologetics*, 28.

44. Van Til, *Idealism*, 127.



tionality which undermines every interpretative endeavor on the part of would-be autonomous man. There is on the modern basis no possibility of the identification of any fact let alone the possibility of finding an intelligent relationship of one fact to another fact. The possibility of science and philosophy as well as the possibility of theology presupposes the idea of a God whose counsel determines “whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>45</sup>

For the post-Kant philosopher, the human mind must be singularly able to discover facts and autonomously legislate the relationship between facts by use of the *a priori* faculty of reason. As Van Til here emphasizes, the modern man understands the world of facts to be a realm of irrationality, or a sphere of facts without meaningful relations, which the mind of man must rationally organize. Van Til insightfully pointed out that if the finite mind of man is the ultimate arbiter of the relationship between facts in history, his interpretation of reality is equally ultimately arbitrary and meaningless. For human knowledge to be possible there must be real relations set between facts by an intelligence ontologically greater and distinct from that of man’s. Hence, God and God’s eschatological plan are the necessary preconditions for human thought. Only God’s original interpretation of the facts of history in his eternal decree can meaningfully legislate the relationship between facts. Man’s epistemic job, then, is not to be rationally legislative as Kant thought, but to be receptive of the information about the facts of creation and their covenantal and eschatological relations as revealed by God.

Van Til drew a further epistemological implication from his doctrine of God and creation. He asserted that since God has determined the facts of creation according to his covenantal and eschatological intentions, man must interpret facts by connecting his experience of facts to God’s revealed eschatological purpose in order to “deal covenantally with every fact of history.”<sup>46</sup> According to Van Til,

In paradise God said to man that if he ate of the forbidden fruit he would surely die. The truth about the facts in the created universe, Adam and Eve were told in effect, could be known ultimately only if one knew their relationship to the plan of God. It is this plan of God that makes all created facts to be what they are. ... Satan, however, suggested to Eve that God’s statement about the relation of one temporal fact to another was not determinative of the nature of that relationship.<sup>47</sup>

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45. *Ibid.*, 133.

46. Van Til, *Theory of Knowledge*, 29.

47. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 33–34.

At the height of the covenant of works, wherein Adam and Eve could either fall from the state of innocence or confirm their simple righteousness, the covenantal question, Van Til points out, was whether Adam and Eve would reject the Devil and interpret the facts of their experience eschatologically according to the Word of the Lord. In man's original epistemic situation, observation was "not sufficient. Man needed to know something about the future."<sup>48</sup> Herein, we see that Van Til's Reformed doctrine of God and creation leads to a redemptive-historical epistemology; a theory of knowledge that is shaped by covenant and eschatology.

### 3. Van Til's Philosophy of Revelation

#### 3.1. The Extent of Revelation

We now turn to how the economic activity of God in history displays God and his will to the mind of man. Naturally, we are brought to the question of *revelation*. Van Til's philosophy of revelation posits that God initiated his revelatory program in his bringing forth of the created order *ex nihilo*. In fact, God's creative and providential work, in that it is personal, is identical with his revelatory activity. In Van Til's view, because the absolute personal God created and controls all things, so all things are covenantally revelatory of God. Van Til asserted that man is in an exhaustively revelatory environment because man's environment is exhaustively determined by God's plan. "In all things man is face to face with God."<sup>49</sup> Man's mind was designed from the beginning to function in the context of revelation, and to reflect in its thoughtful activity the revealed truth of God. Van Til describes the revelatory situation of man:

According to Scripture, God has created the "universe." God has created time and space. God has created all the "facts" of science. God has created the human mind. In this human mind God has laid the laws of thought according to which it is to operate. In the facts of science God has laid the laws of being according to which they function. In other words, the impress of God's plan is upon his whole creation.

We may characterize this whole situation by saying that the creation of God is a revelation of God. God revealed himself in nature and God also revealed himself in the mind of man. Thus it is impossible for the mind of man to function except in an atmosphere of revelation. And every thought of man when

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48. *Ibid.*, 34.

49. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 62.

it functioned normally in this atmosphere of revelation would express the truth as laid in the creation by God.<sup>50</sup>

Van Til affirmed that God displays himself and his will in the external and internal environment of man. The created order around man reveals God just as much as his inner psyche does. Man lives in a truly exhaustively revelatory context; and moreover, this exhaustively personal and revelatory environment is a reflection of God's absolute trinitarian personality.

### 3.2. Nature and Scripture

The internal and external revelation of God and his will has been understood in Reformed theology as natural revelation. As Paul teaches in Romans 1, the natural revelation of God displayed in creation leaves all men without excuse when it comes to the "God question." All men know the one true and living, triune God through the things that have been made (although, post-fall, all men outside of Christ suppress their knowledge of the truth by their unrighteousness). Van Til was adamant to maintain with Calvin that the external as well as the internal environments of man have been made by God, and so reveal God.<sup>51</sup> For Van Til, "self-consciousness immediately involves God-consciousness."<sup>52</sup> This God-consciousness is not gained by "syllogistic process of reasoning."<sup>53</sup> Instead, from Eden this primal awareness of God was gained non-discursively—that is, not by process of reasoning—through external and internal means. Alternatively, God-consciousness constituted the touchstone for other cognitive processes, so that "God-consciousness was for [Adam] the presupposition of the significance of his reasoning on anything."<sup>54</sup> In the Garden, man's inner self and the environment around him also told him something of who he was in his prophetic, priestly, and kingly office—namely, God's covenantal servant, made to glorify God with all his being and functions, including his intellectual faculties. In Van Til's mind, Adam's knowledge of God, self, and the world involved knowledge of God's purpose for him in creation history, and therefore an awareness of God's plan.<sup>55</sup> However, Van Til thought that this natural knowledge of God, self, and the world was woefully insuffi-

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50. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 1.

51. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.1.1 and 1.5.1. See also Van Til, *Apologetics*, 115–16.

52. Van Til, *Modern Thought*, 8. Emphasis in original.

53. Van Til, *Defense*, 113.

54. *Ibid.*

55. In Van Til's words, "Consciousness of objects and of self in time meant consciousness of history in relationship to the plan of God back of history. Man's first sense of self-awareness implied the awareness of the presence of God as the one for whom he has a great task to accomplish" (Van Til, *Apologetics*, 117).

cient in and of itself. From the very beginning of Adam's existence, God superadded to the natural revelation within and without man a supernatural special revelation. Man was not designed to gather a sufficient understanding of God and his plan from nature alone. Van Til states,

It should be remembered that even in paradise before the fall, man did not live by the internal standard of his consciousness alone. God spoke to man by giving to him commands that did not emanate from his moral consciousness. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the command not to eat of it were not given to man directly by his moral consciousness. What his moral consciousness did do with respect to this was to answer that it was his business to obey this command, since it was the command of the same God who spoke directly through itself.<sup>56</sup>

Put another way, natural revelation and special revelation must be seen as "presupposing and supplementing one another."<sup>57</sup> God's natural revelation (internal and external) and special revelation are not two separate and self-sufficient revelations of God, but they are one revelation in two forms. In opposition to the medieval nature/grace dualism, Van Til noted that natural and special revelation cannot always be sharply distinguished. For example, Van Til pointed out that "saving grace is not manifest in nature; yet it is the God of saving grace who manifests himself by means of nature."<sup>58</sup> Natural revelation does not impart knowledge of grace. Yet, Christ's work in redemption did not take place in an ethereal context, but in the realm of natural history, in time and space. We might preliminarily articulate the basic unity that Van Til saw in the two forms of revelation by stating that they are bound together by their mutual source in God and their shared covenantal and eschatological purpose. Both forms of revelation issue from the one triune God; both forms reveal God and his one all-comprehensive plan with covenantal and eschatological significance. However, Van Til recognized that the two forms of revelation have some differences in character, function, and content inside the context of their basic theocentric covenantal and eschatological continuity. Van Til noted that God's regular work in nature provides the "playground" or environment for God's more special work in relationship to man.<sup>59</sup> For example, the tree of the knowledge

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56. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 129–30.

57. Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium* (ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946), 257.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

of good and evil was natural, not special. But Adam and Eve could not understand the tree's true significance in covenant history unless, in addition to the natural revelation of the tree, God also provided a supernatural Word about what would happen in the future should Adam and Eve eat of the tree's fruit. God's natural and special revelation serve God's purpose in covenant history. The natural revelation of God provides the context for the special revelation of God, but the special revelation of God reveals God's full, eschatological purpose for man and nature. Had God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil outside of the environment of natural revelation, there would have been no tree and no Adam and Eve. God's special revelation cannot appear in a vacuum. At the same time, had God not spoken in a special act to Adam and Eve, they would have been ignorant of the eschatological forbiddance of the tree's fruit and could have neither proven themselves in the covenant of works and entered into glory, nor fallen from their state of innocence into a state of sin and misery. God's work in nature cannot serve its purpose in history without God's special revelation. Put another way, natural and special revelation constitute "God's one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man"<sup>60</sup> and together bring "knowledge of the whole plan of God with respect to man."<sup>61</sup>

### 3.3. The Interpretive Priority of Scripture

It is obvious upon a first reading of Van Til's writings that the doctrine of the fall played a prominent role in his thought. In Van Til's view, because man has fallen through Adam into the state of sin, he no longer uses the tools of his intellect to understand nature in its relation to God's special revelation. Instead, fallen man "undertakes to interpret the nature of reality in terms of himself as the final reference point"; he attempts to determine the nature and meaning of the facts by his own opinions and suppositions.<sup>62</sup> Nature is, then, constantly misused and misunderstood. In light of the devastating noetic effects of sin, Van Til affirmed, God's special revelation comes to man in the form of God's redemptive word, functioning as both an additive and a corrective.<sup>63</sup> Post-fall, God's Word is intended to provide both information necessary to understand fully the covenantal and eschatological meaning of nature, and information necessary to redeem man and his fallen cognitive faculties. In reference to the corrective function of Scripture, Van Til states,

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60. Ibid.

61. Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 170.

62. Ibid., 282.

63. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 194–95.

Since man has, through the fall in Adam, become a sinner, man cannot know and therefore love God except through Christ the Mediator. And it is in Scripture alone that he learns about this Mediator. Scripture is the Word of Christ, the Son of God and Son of man. No sinner knows anything truly except he knows Christ, and no one knows Christ truly unless the Holy Ghost, the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son, regenerates him.<sup>64</sup>

It is by and with the Word that the Spirit regenerates man, applies the work of Christ, and enables man to attain true knowledge. Once man has received the benefits of redemption, he is able to see the covenantal and eschatological character of creation in light of Scripture. Van Til states:

Thus the Bible, as the infallibly inspired revelation of God to sinful man, stands before us as that light in terms of which all the facts of the created universe must be interpreted. All of finite existence, natural and redemptive, functions in relation to one all-inclusive plan that is in the mind of God. Whatever insight man is to have into this pattern of the activity of God he must attain by looking at all his objects of research in the light of Scripture.<sup>65</sup>

Van Til thought that neither God's revelation in nature nor his revelation in Scripture was intended to function self-sufficiently; each form of revelation is dependent on the other; both facets of God's revelation were designed to be taken together by man in order for him to have a proper understanding of reality. Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two forms of revelation. As Van Til asserted, God's "revelation in nature and revelation in Scripture are mutually meaningless without one another and mutually fruitful when taken together. ... God's revelation in nature, together with God's revelation in Scripture, form God's one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man."<sup>66</sup> Given this mutually beneficial relationship, Van Til still insisted that God's special revelation is the first among equals. While philosophy might be said to study knowledge, reality, and values as natural revelations of God, and natural science might be said to study the revelation of God displayed in natural phenomena, nevertheless, "philosophy and science must, as well as theology, turn to Scripture for whatever light it has to offer on general principles and particular facts."<sup>67</sup> Van Til was adamant that though natural and

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64. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 5.

65. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 139.

66. Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," 257.

67. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 61.

special revelation presuppose and supplement each other, the additive and redemptive nature of special revelation implies that no one can truly know “any fact of nature for what it is, as created, directed, and controlled by God, except through Scripture.”<sup>68</sup>

### 3.4. The Christological Nature of Revelation

Van Til’s philosophy of revelation, as we have seen, asserts that history is fully permeated with the revelation of God to man. God’s two forms of revelation—natural and special—function together for God’s covenantal and eschatological purposes. God gave man revelation so that he might affirm the covenant in his interpretive endeavors. When man failed to affirm the covenant, God gave man a new redemptive-revelation with which to interpret the plane of created reality. What we have yet to touch on is the central place of Christ in Van Til’s philosophy of revelation. According to Van Til, the unity of Christ’s providential work, inclusive of creation and covenant, secures the organic interrelationship of natural and special revelation. The Son has brought about every fact of nature and previous dispensation of the covenant in order to provide the context for his incarnation in redemptive history. Consider the following two quotes by Van Til regarding the relationship between Christ and the facts of nature:

Every fact and every law in the created universe is brought into existence by God’s creation. Every fact and every law in the created universe continues to exist by virtue of the providence of God. Every fact and every law in the created universe accomplishes what it does accomplish by virtue of the plan or purpose of God. God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, through his Son Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup>

Christ as the Great King makes every force of nature subservient to the work of redemption accomplished by himself on Calvary as the High Priest.<sup>70</sup>

The thrust of these two passages from Van Til points to the Christological origin and teleology of the facts of creation history. Put succinctly, the realm of nature (natural revelation) exists by virtue of Christ’s kingly providential realization of the purpose of God, and God’s purpose has as its central focus Christ’s priestly eschatological work of redemption (special revelation). Correspondingly, God’s reve-

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68. Van Til, *Modern Thought*, 8.

69. Van Til, *Evidences*, 50–51.

70. Cornelius Van Til, “Response [to Jack B. Rogers],” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 167.

lation is properly received in the consciousness of man when man integrates what he learns in nature and in Scripture through implementing the redemptive-historical revelation of Christ as the interpretive eschatological key of all reality. Van Til put the issue this way:

The Christian interprets all things in the field of theology, in the field of philosophy and in the field of science in terms of the presupposition of the truth of the 'story' he is told in Scripture. ... The covenant-keeper knows that he and his world are created in and redeemed by Christ. ... The Christian ... interpret[s] all of history as the process of the victory of Christ over Satan. His philosophy of fact and his philosophy of logic form an aspect of this total philosophy of history.<sup>71</sup>

To state Van Til's argument in this passage in a slightly different manner: the structure of covenant history is such that Christ's providential work in creation is in service and anticipation of his work in redemption; hence, reality is Christocentrically and Christotelically constituted. This Christological constitution of created reality entails that for the Christian to understand the world properly, he must interpret it according to Christ's eschatological accomplishment. Hence, a Christian philosophy of history (redemptive history) implies a Christian philosophy of fact (reality) and a Christian philosophy of logic (interpretation).

We might say, then, that according to Van Til's philosophy of revelation, all of history radiates with revelation: "the revelation of the absolute God [is] everywhere found in the created universe, so that no matter where man would turn, to himself or to nature about him, he would meet God."<sup>72</sup> God's revelation of himself and his eschatological plan is in one covenantal scheme constituted by two forms (natural and special). Both forms of revelation are Christologically generated, cohered, and oriented; they are created by Christ, sustained by Christ, and have their end in Christ. Christ's work in creation and his work in redemption are so tightly knit that the natural and special revelation issuing from Christ's activity cannot be divided in the human consciousness, but must be organically integrated by the human subject in the categories of Christ's eschatological person and work in order to be understood. In short, Van Til's metaphysic and epistemology are inherently Christological. The particulars and the universals of reality are couched in the broader situation of the triune God's historically unfolding revelatory intentions in Christ, and the human subject must interact with his objects of inquiry with this redemptive-historical truth in mind. As Van Til states,

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71. Cornelius Van Til, *The Knudsen-Dooyeweerd Criticism of My Apologetics* (part 1 of *Herman Dooyeweerd and Reformed Apologetics*; 3 parts; self-published, 1974), 7-8.

72. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 18.



By virtue of creation we have seen the universals and particulars that we meet with in the universe cannot exist in independence of one another. ... They are made for one another. They ... find their fruitful contact because they have been created in fruitful contact with one another by God. ... When the human mind recognizes these facts, it recognizes that all things in this universe and especially his own mind are a revelation of God. There could be no true knowledge except it be by the recognition of the revelation of God. To know truly, man's thought must be *receptively reconstructive* of the revelation of God [in Christ].<sup>73</sup>

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73. Cornelius Van Til, *Psychology of Religion* (unpublished syllabus, donated by Van Til to the Covenant College Anna E. Kresge Memorial Library in 1966), 51. Emphasis in original. Logos Bible Software 4, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til* (40 vols.), has a 1971 published edition of *Psychology of Religion* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R), wherein Van Til added the phrase "in Christ" to the end of this paragraph. Much of Van Til's philosophy of revelation reflects Bavinck's work on the same subject (see Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, esp. 382–83, and Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* [trans. Geerhardus Vos; n.p.: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1909], esp. 27–28). Laurence R. O'Donnell, III, argues that Van Til's heavy dependence on Bavinck's theology and the works of other Dutch theologians and philosophers requires that Van Til should be classified as a "neo-Calvinist rather than a Copernican revolutionary" (Laurence R. O'Donnell, III, "Neither 'Copernican' nor 'Van Tilian': Re-Reading Cornelius Van Til's Reformed Apologetics in Light of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*," *The Bavinck Review* 2 [2011], 94; see also Laurence R. O'Donnell, "Kees Van Til als Nederlandse-Amerikaanse, Neo-Calvinistisch-Presbyteriaan Apologeticus: An Analysis of Cornelius Van Til's Presupposition of Reformed Dogmatics with Special Reference to Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*" [Th.M. Thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2011]). O'Donnell's researched assessment is helpful in that it demonstrates that Van Til was not—and did not intend to be—fundamentally *sui generis* in his theology, philosophy, or apologetic. O'Donnell seems to miss, however, the unique and revolutionary way Van Til integrated the thought of other Dutch Calvinist thinkers with the thought of Geerhardus Vos. More pointedly, O'Donnell appears to overlook how Van Til cleaned up Bavinck's dogmatic formulations—particularly his revelational and epistemological formulations—in light of Vos's biblical theology. For instance, some of Van Til's strongest criticisms of Kuyper and Bavinck were that they remained abstract in their understanding of man and the *principia* in science, when they should have recognized with Calvin and Vos that man, as a cognitive agent, lives in the "concrete situation" of revelation history (Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 69). Further, Van Til stated: "I had through the years attempted to state the Calvinistic interpretation of life in ever increasing sharpness of contrast to the position of the natural man. I had tried to work out Kuyper's *Calvinism*, Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation* and Stoker's *Philosophy of the Creation Idea* with increasing depth and breadth by trying to follow Paul when he challenged the whole of Greek thinking to repentance and submission to the triune God who is man's creator, redeemer and judge" (Cornelius Van Til, *Synthesis Thinking* [part 3 of *Herman Dooyeweerd and Reformed Apologetics*; 3 parts; self-published, 1974], 43). Van Til claimed, in other words, that he interacted with the work of other Dutch Calvinist thinkers by expanding and critiquing their thought in light of Paul's eschatology, which Van Til learned principally from Geerhardus Vos. In short, it seems to me that Muether is right: Van Til was indebted to the "biblical theological approach of Geerhardus Vos" in part because Van Til "oriented his own approach to systematic theology around the history of redemption" (Muether, *Van Til*, 72). Consider as another example the beginning of Van Til's discussion of revelation in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* where he maps out an organized scheme of

## 4. Van Til's Epistemology

### 4.1. The Noetic Antithesis

Van Til began his work as an epistemologist with his Th.M. thesis, "Reformed Epistemology."<sup>74</sup> Van Til updated and expanded this thesis until it eventually became his most impressive volume on the theory of knowledge, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*.<sup>75</sup> Throughout his life-long labors in epistemology, Van Til insisted that there is a noetic antithesis between Christians and non-Christians.<sup>76</sup> In "Reformed Epistemology" Van Til stressed the distinction between the regenerate and unregenerate consciousness. In regard to the unregenerate consciousness Van Til states the following:

We take it that the Scriptures are very explicit in their statements of the gruesome effects of sin. The noetic effects are generally summed up by the term "darkened." The understanding has been darkened. The Westminster Confession says that sin, "wholly defiled our faculties." That is a splendid and comprehensive phrase. ... In paradise man had true knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Ever since his fall in sin man has none of these. ... [Fallen man] has lost true knowledge.<sup>77</sup>

Man, then, is epistemically lost while remaining in the state of sin; because of his corrupt nature, carnal man is unable to achieve true knowledge.<sup>78</sup> However, there is hope for man: there is redemption in Jesus Christ. Van Til states,

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revelation and then clearly indicates his affinity with Vos by asserting that "we have to think of this whole affair as moving through history" (122).

74. Accessed through Logos Bible Software 4, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til (40 vols.)*, n.p. Van Til completed his Th.M. thesis at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1926 under C. W. Hodge, the grandson of Charles Hodge (Muether, *Van Til*, 55).

75. Eric D. Bristley, *A Guide to the Writings of Cornelius Van Til, 1895–1987* (Chicago: Olive Tree Communications, 1995); accessed through Logos Bible Software 4, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til (40 vols.)*, n.p.

76. Van Til, *Defense*, 70.

77. Van Til, "Reformed Epistemology," n.p.

78. In a discussion on the nature of Christian scholarship, Alvin Plantinga once stated to Nicholas Wolterstorff, "I remember when you and I were in college we sometimes thought about C. Van Til, and we probably thought about him in a completely wrong way. ... What I heard from people in those days, and I did not read much Cornelius Van Til himself, was that Cornelius Van Til thought that only Christians knew anything" (Biola University, "Wolterstorff/Plantinga: The Nature of Christian Scholarship - Center For Christian Thought," *YouTube* video, 33:06, July 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFGyQy4VGE0>). Wolterstorff responded, "Of course there was a somewhat arch definition of 'know' operative there" (Ibid). Although the tone of Plantinga and Wolterstorff was unfortunately disparaging toward Van Til in this interview, they suggested some important ideas about Van Til's theory of knowledge. First, it is wrong to think about Van Til's epistemology as if it is primarily

Lawlessness must be taken away, and obedience renewed before the knowledge of God is possible again. Hence the necessity of the crucifixion of Christ, the Son of Man. ... He died upon the cross in our stead. Therewith all the obstacles to validity have not only been removed, but validity has been actualized. ... We must be justified in Him if we are to have knowledge of God, of the world, and of man.<sup>79</sup>

From Van Til's perspective, union with Christ is absolutely necessary to achieve true knowledge: "The search for truth is an existential matter. One's attitude toward Christ is always involved."<sup>80</sup>

Van Til taught that non-Christians have what we might call *false* knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Because God's common grace restrains the darkness of sin from completely enveloping the thoughts of unbelievers, they frequently assent to truth and reach verisimilitude in their explanations of reality. But because common grace does not finally set unbelievers free from the power of sin over their minds, they simultaneously suppress the truth and provide ultimately misguided theories of reality which are hostile to the triune God of the Bible. Unbelievers are not completely unreasonable, though they are wholly incapable of achieving an understanding of reality that is in tune with God's revelation and complies with his covenantal demands. The extent of the noetic continuity and discontinuity between Christians and non-Christians is best seen in light of Van Til's anthropology. Van Til held with the Heidelberg Catechism that "God created man good and in his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might truly know God his creator, love him with all his heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory" (Q&A 6). The fall, however, "poisoned our nature [so] that we are born sinners—corrupt from conception on" (Q&A 7). Van Til affirmed that after the fall man retained the image of God broadly or formally, but he lost it in the narrow sense. As Van Til states:

Our viewpoint that the Adamic [consciousness] is the prototype of all forms of consciousness rests upon the Reformed doctrines of the image of God and common grace. ... Upon such a basis then, the image of God in the narrower sense consisting of true knowledge, righteousness and holiness is

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about propositional knowledge, competence knowledge, or acquaintance knowledge. Second, Van Til had a unique definition of "true knowledge" which explains why he made the bold claim that only Christians can truly know. Stated tersely, by "true knowledge" Van Til meant a correct *interpretation* or *understanding* of a thing that affirms the covenant because it is ascertained in the way God designed for man to cognitively grasp things.

79. Van Til, "Reformed Epistemology," n.p.

80. Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1963), 147.

81. See Van Til, *Apologetics*, 48.

lost through sin, but the image of God in the wider sense consisting of man's rationality is retained. Adam, the non-regenerate, and the regenerate man have this rationality in common.<sup>82</sup>

Man has retained all of his God-given faculties after the fall, though they are now corrupt. Man has knowledge in the state of sin, but he does not have *true* knowledge; fallen man does not know in the way God originally designed him to know.<sup>83</sup> In order for man to have true knowledge, he must enter the state of grace through Christ. Christ must give man a new heart that loves God and a new mind receptive of God's revelation before man can have true knowledge of God and God's creation.<sup>84</sup> As we move forward in an attempt to illuminate Van Til's thought, it is of the upmost importance to realize that his theory of true knowledge is a theory of how man should interpret things in the way God originally intended. Van Til prescribed a process of knowledge-acquisition aimed at achieving understanding that is both correct and covenant-affirming.<sup>85</sup>

#### 4.2. Thinking God's Thoughts After Him

Taking his cue from Bavinck, Van Til taught that man must think "God's thoughts after him."<sup>86</sup> Bavinck meant by this phrase that when doing theology, the dogmatician should "reproduce the unity that is objectively present in the thoughts of God and has been recorded for the eye of faith in Scripture."<sup>87</sup> Following Bavinck, Van Til held that "human knowledge is to think God's thoughts after Him *analogically*"<sup>88</sup> through "self-conscious submission to the voluntary revelation of the self-sufficient God,"<sup>89</sup> especially God's "supernatural

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82. Van Til, "Reformed Epistemology," n.p.

83. As Van Til states elsewhere, "When Paul speaks of the natural or fallen man as knowing God and as knowing and even in a sense doing good, he is not speaking of that knowledge which is according to *truth*, that knowledge which man needs in order to be what God at the first made him to be" (Van Til, *Theory of Knowledge*, 45. Emphasis added).

84. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 48.

85. For example, in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til set up Adam's pre-fall estate as a partial epistemic ideal: originally Adam could "converse truly about the meaning of the universe." He had "self-consciously analogical" knowledge, and thus sought "to know the facts of the universe in order to fulfill his task as a covenant-keeper" (63).

86. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 77.

87. Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena* (vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; 4 vols.; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 44.

88. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 37. Emphasis in original.

89. Cornelius Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Ripon, Calif.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967), 8.

thought communication”<sup>90</sup> in Scripture. Van Til affirmed that there is a distinction in type between the knowledge of creatures and the knowledge of the Creator. Man cannot have divine knowledge, for this implies that man has divine intellectual attributes and participates in the divine essence.<sup>91</sup> Such entailments compromise God’s dignity and unique aseity: “God’s being and knowledge are absolutely comprehensive; such knowledge is too wonderful for man; he cannot attain unto it.”<sup>92</sup> Hence, to protect the Creator/creature distinction, Van Til asserted that human knowledge is correct not because it exactly tracks with the nature, source, and scope of God’s knowledge; rather, human knowledge is true knowledge to the extent that it analogically corresponds to God’s knowledge.<sup>93</sup> According to Van Til, this analogical correspondence between God’s thoughts and man’s thoughts is achieved when man receives and submits to God’s revelation in nature and Scripture; further, “when man thinks thus he thinks as a covenant creature should wish to think.”<sup>94</sup>

Van Til formulated his theory of analogical knowledge with an awareness of the Reformed distinction between God’s necessary and free knowledge. Van Til states, “God’s knowledge of himself and God’s knowledge of the facts of the universe must be the standard of knowledge.”<sup>95</sup> Man must submit to God’s revelation of his necessary knowledge and free knowledge when thinking about God and the universe—when thinking about the Creator and the creature. The present study is primarily concerned with what Van Til theorized in regard to man’s analogical knowledge of creation; therefore, the central question being asked in this section is, What does it mean, according to Van Til, to analogically reflect God’s free knowledge?

Recognizing the identity of God’s free knowledge with his will or plan for the whole created order, Van Til held that man must reconstruct (on a creaturely level) God’s plan as revealed to him in nature and Scripture in order to reflect God’s thoughts about the created world. Van Til consequently developed an analogy model that extended beyond Bavinck’s. He states,

What comes to pass in history happens in accord with that system or plan by which [God] orders the universe. ... [Man] must, to be sure, think God’s thoughts after him; but this means that he must, in seeking to form his own system, con-

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90. Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 132.

91. In Van Til’s words, “It is only on the assumption that the human mind is not the mind of a creature but is itself the mind of the Creator that one can talk consistently of identity of content between the mind of man and the mind of God” (Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 271).

92. Van Til, *Defense*, 35.

93. *Ibid.*, 56–57. See also Van Til, *Epistemology*, 48.

94. Van Til, *Doctrine of Scripture*, 8.

95. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 200.

stantly be subject to the authority of God's system *to the extent* that this is revealed to him.<sup>96</sup>

In other words, man must construct a systematic interpretation of reality that corresponds to the authoritative system of God's revealed plan: man's "own interpretation of nature must therefore be a re-interpretation [by self-conscious submission to revelation] of what is already fully interpreted by God [in his revealed plan]."<sup>97</sup> We can begin to formulate Van Til's extended analogy model as follows: to analogically reflect God's free knowledge, man must think God's plan after him by interpreting God's revelation of his plan in nature and in Scripture. By thus "reinterpreting the counsel of God as expressed in creation" through submitting to revelation, man can fulfill the covenantal "responsibility and task" that God "placed upon him from the outset of history."<sup>98</sup>

### 4.3. Christological Interpretation

In *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Van Til described his epistemology as a "*revelational epistemology*."<sup>99</sup> Van Til chose this label for his theory of analogical knowledge to make clear the important role God's revelatory program plays in man's epistemic endeavors. Put succinctly: according to Van Til, how man gains true knowledge of creation is directly connected to how God has made his plan knowable to man through revelation. Van Til saw, therefore, a strong link between his theory of analogical knowledge and his philosophy of revelation.

Van Til's philosophy of revelation states that natural and special revelation are organically interconnected and that they conjointly reveal God's exhaustively determinative plan for the universe; because God has created and sustained facts to serve his covenantal and eschatological intentions, what God reveals through the facts of the universe is inherently tied to what he reveals in Scripture about his covenantal and eschatological purpose. The epistemological conclusion Van Til drew was that for man to have true knowledge, he must integrate in his own thinking what God has revealed in nature and Scripture by interpreting the facts of nature according to God's revealed covenantal and eschatological goal. In Van Til's view, Adam needed "special supernatural communication of God" in addition to his natural ability to reflect upon the created order so he could "in-

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96. Van Til, *Theory of Knowledge*, 16. Emphasis in original.

97. Van Til, *Doctrine of Scripture*, 8.

98. Van Til, *Apologetics*, 115.

99. Van Til, *Epistemology*, 1. Emphasis in original.

terpret nature and himself correctly in terms of [God's intended eschatological] destiny [for nature and man]."<sup>100</sup> Van Til states further,

It is of prime importance to observe that even in paradise man was never meant to study nature by means of observation and experiment without connection with positive *super-natural* thought communication given to him by God. Nature could not be observed for what it actually is except in relation to history, and history cannot be seen for what it is at any stage except it be viewed in relation to its final end. And only by direct supernatural revelation could man have an adequate notion of this end.<sup>101</sup>

We can further flesh out Van Til's extended analogy model the following way: to think God's revealed plan after him, man must implement his rational and empirical faculties to integrate what God has revealed about his plan in nature and in Scripture; and this process of integrating God's two forms of revelation equates to interpreting created facts according to God's unfolding eschatological program.

In Section 2, we mentioned how Van Til located the genesis of the unity between God's two forms of revelation in the more basic unity of Christ's person and work as creator and mediator of the covenant. Christ is the origin, sustainer, and end of revelation; knowledge of his life, death, and resurrection is subsequently vital to properly understanding the unified message of nature and Scripture. Hence, to reflect in our consciousness God's revealed plan, "*every fact must be interpreted Christologically.*"<sup>102</sup> Van Til, following Calvin, thought that God intended special revelation to be the lens through which man observed natural revelation.<sup>103</sup> The driving force behind Van Til's affirmation of the interpretive necessity of special revelation was soteriological and eschatological: special revelation is indispensable for man to understand nature because it renews man's epistemic faculties and brings into view the end for which the facts of natural revelation are created and sustained—in other words, special revelation is epistemically necessary for man because it reveals *Christ*. In Van Til's own words, "*no valid interpretation of any fact can be carried on except upon the basis of the authoritative thought communication to man*

100. Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 171.

101. *Ibid.*, 126. Emphasis in original.

102. Van Til, *Modern Thought*, 98. Emphasis in original. See Lane G. Tipton, "Paul's Christological Interpretation of Creation and Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007) for an exegetical defense of what has thus far been said about the redemptive-historical, Christological nature of Van Til's epistemology. See also Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 103–24.

103. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1 and 1.14.1. See also Van Til, *Epistemology*, 95.

of God's final purposes in Scripture, as this Scripture sets forth in final form the redemptive work of Christ."<sup>104</sup> Scripture, in Van Til's view, is necessary for true knowledge because it, through Christ's Spirit, redemptively corrects man's fallen interpretative faculties and reveals God's eschatological purpose for the facts of nature in Christ.

Van Til's own natural law theory functions as an example of how he thought the Christian should interpret all things Christologically. Since at least the time of David Hume, philosophers have popularly defined a miracle as a deity's suspension or transgression of a law of nature.<sup>105</sup> However, Van Til did not define the laws of nature in this abstract way—that is, apart from God's purpose of grace in Christ. Instead of defining the miraculous birth of Isaac as a *suspension* or *transgression* of the laws of biology, Van Til thought that the birth of Isaac was in some sense a *result* of natural law. Van Til states that in the case of Isaac's birth the laws of biology "are servants to the purposes of God's grace. ... Isaac the heir of the covenant, would be born, according to the laws of nature, as these operated subject to the promises of covenant grace."<sup>106</sup> In Van Til's view, God's providential activity in natural law is determined by God's will for the covenant of grace; in Van Til's words, "The whole of nature and history are, from the outset, seen in the light of the redemption that is through Christ. ... From the time of the primal promise of Christ's work, the teleology of nature is subordinated to the teleology of redeeming grace."<sup>107</sup> We can broaden and apply Van Til's discussion of natural law and miracle to our current exposition of Van Til's epistemology: just as one cannot understand Sarah's reproductive system without reference to God's promise in Christ, neither can one understand any other aspect of nature outside of God's revealed purpose. According to Van Til, "*Nothing*, no fact or law, can be seen as it truly is except in the light of the revelation of God in Christ through Scripture."<sup>108</sup>

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104. Van Til, *Modern Thought*, 98. Emphasis in original.

105. In Hume's words, "A miracle may be accurately defined, a *transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*" (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *Modern Philosophy* [ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann; vol. 3 of *Philosophic Classics*, ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann; 5th ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2008], 408n. Emphasis in original).

106. Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1974), 31. According to Van Til, the "laws of science" as we know them are really only "appearances" which do not hinder God from working a "biological miracle" as a gift of grace "for the redemption of His people" (Cornelius Van Til, "The Old Testament Ethical Ideal," *The Banner* [June 2, 1938], 507, 523).

107. Cornelius Van Til, *The Search for Meaning in Modern Thought*; accessed through Logos Bible Software 4, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til (40 vols.)*, n.p.

108. Cornelius Van Til, "Response [to Robert D. Knudsen] by C. Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 305. Emphasis in original.



#### 4.5. Union with Christ

When formalizing his epistemology, Van Til meant to articulate one aspect of life in Christ. Scripture teaches that the believer's existence in union with Christ is a heavenly, eschatological existence which implies a specific kind of life (Eph. 2:4–10). The Apostle Paul taught that since Christians have been “raised with Christ,” so they must set their minds on things that are above, “where Christ is” (Col. 3:1–3).<sup>109</sup> Vos insightfully points out on the basis of First Peter 1:3–5 that the Christian is one who “lives with his heavenly destiny ever in full view. His outlook is not bound by the present life and the present world. He sees that which is and that which is to come in their true proportions and in their proper perspective. The centre of gravity of his consciousness lies not in the present but in the future.”<sup>110</sup> As Vos states in his magnificent sermon on the book of Hebrews, “Heavenly-Mindedness,” the Christian “walks in the light of the heavenly world.”<sup>111</sup> Gleaning from the writings of Paul and the exegesis of Vos, Van Til taught that knowledge of the final (i.e., heavenly) purposes of God in Christ is essential for all interpretation.<sup>112</sup> Van Til's construal of “true knowledge” is an epistemological construction incorporating a principle of truth “from which, now that [the Christian] is in Christ, he daily operates.”<sup>113</sup> In Van Til's view, the operative principle of heavenly life present in the believer through Christ should regiment all of his thoughts and actions. Just as the Christian must “live in the glory” of Christ's future consummation, so he must also think in this glory.<sup>114</sup>

As one element of life in Christ, truly knowing in this way described by Van Til is not only the academic pursuit of the Christian scholar, it is also a constitutive component of the life of the simple Christian. Van Til states:

This totality picture, this Christian philosophy of history, is that which the common man takes from the Bible. He receives it on the authority of the Bible as the Word of the self-attesting Christ. We may call this common man who believes

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109. Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

110. Geerhardus Vos, “The Christian's Hope,” in *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 142.

111. Geerhardus Vos, “Heavenly-Mindedness,” in *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 115.

112. Van Til, *Modern Thought*, 138.

113. Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity in Conflict: Part 3* (in vol. 2 of *Christianity in Conflict: Syllabus for Course in History of Apologetics*; 2 vols.; self-published by Van Til, 1962), 5.

114. Van Til, *Meaning in Modern Thought*, n.p. See also Van Til, *Apologetics*, 48.

the Christian philosophy or view of life as a whole the *simple Christian* or the *simple believer*. When this simple believer deals, as he daily must and does, with the “data of experience,” then he at once thinks of them in relation to Christ.<sup>115</sup>

When living self-consciously out of his union with Christ, the simple Christian not only hears the Word, but he applies it to the full spectrum of his thoughtful activity in the created realm. He does not think of a rock as a random chunk of matter. The simple Christian sees it as a revelation of God, integrally and inseparably related to the spiritual Rock from which Israel drank, the Christ who will be glorified for all eternity with his church, spiritual Israel. Of course, the Christian scholar also should live out of his union with Christ, and so implement the same biblical concepts as the simple Christian in his more extensive theoretical thought. The difference between the simple Christian and the Christian scholar, to use Van Til’s vernacular, is only a matter of degree. They both have true knowledge because they understand reality in light of Christ.

## 5. Conclusion

In his 1971 festschrift Van Til claimed, “The self-attesting Christ of Scripture has always been my starting point for everything I have said.”<sup>116</sup> Van Til made clear that the Christ of revelation history oriented his philosophical work. The impact of Vos on Van Til’s philosophical methodology is unmistakable. Van Til did not apply Vos’s biblical theological insights to the exclusion of previous systematic constructions made by the church. Van Til heavily incorporated the work of previous Reformed theologians such as Berkhof, Bavinck, Hodge, Warfield, the Westminster divines, the Heidelberg committee, and Calvin. We have seen that what manifested in Van Til’s thinking was a Christian philosophy that wove together biblical and systematic theology in self-conscious submission to the Christ of redemptive-revelation. His integrative knowledge of the various theological disciplines and his sharp mind well versed in the history of philosophy enabled Van Til to produce a theory of Christian knowing unlike any that had been developed previously.

Hendrik Stoker, in his contribution to Van Til’s festschrift, wrote that Van Til’s “theory of knowledge is in our Calvinistic community definitely original and of unique significance.”<sup>117</sup> Recognizing that

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115. Van Til, *Conflict*, 2. Emphasis in original.

116. Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 3.

117. Hendrik G. Stoker, “Reconnoitering the Theory of Knowledge of Prof. Dr. Cornelius Van Til,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 37.

Van Til's work in epistemology had a theological and apologetical focus, Stoker set out on a "primarily philosophical pursuit of the problem of knowledge," which presupposed the validity of Van Til's approach, and expressed a desire for Van Til to join him.<sup>118</sup> Van Til responded to Stoker, "You ask me to turn right and explain the detailed relations of the facts of the universe operating on God's plan. Well Dr. Stoker, I leave that to you. I have tried to learn from you as you have discussed these details in your various writings. But I cannot do what you have done."<sup>119</sup> Indeed, Van Til initiated a Copernican revolution in Christian philosophy—but precision was not his greatest strength. Van Til realized that philosophers such as Stoker were better suited than he to work out the details of his theory of knowledge. Close attention to Stoker's essay on epistemology in Van Til's festschrift shows that he took Van Til's extended analogy model seriously and yet sought to be precise and unique in his own philosophical formulations. Christian philosophers working post-Van Til would do well to follow Stoker's example.

Van Til's model of analogical knowledge is by no means the last word on epistemology. It could benefit greatly from further philosophical consideration. However, those seeking to provide philosophical improvement of Van Til's thought should heed Van Til's words:

If then we are to have a Christian philosophy of life, a Christian picture of the totality of all that concerns man, we shall need frankly to start from Christ as the one who identifies himself in history and speaks to us in history through his Word. We shall need to see that the one who says *I am that I am* in Exodus is the God of Abraham and therefore of the seed of Abraham, the Christ of the New Testament.<sup>120</sup>

The Apostle Paul in his exhortation to the Colossians demands nothing less than a philosophy "according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). To the degree that Van Til's philosophical integration of biblical and systematic theology contributed to this Pauline end, the Calvinistic philosophical community should take up the mantle of his thought.

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118. *Ibid.*, 25.

119. Cornelius Van Til, "Response [to Hendrik G. Stoker] by C. Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 73.

120. Van Til, *Conflict*, 1. Emphasis in original.