AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION
OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL'S
DOCTRINE OF COMMON GRACE

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TO THE MEMORY OF PETER J. STEEN
We ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation; let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. How can the mind of its own leading come to search out God's essence when it cannot even get to its own? Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself. And let us not take it into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in his Sacred Word, or to think anything about him that is not prompted by his Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word.

John Calvin
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INTRODUCTION

The present work is intended to explain and evaluate Cornelius Van Til's doctrine of common grace. It will be shown how Van Til was motivated by a desire to oppose any notion of "commonness" between believers and unbelievers based upon a concept of naturalis ratio, and how his own views were set in opposition to any idea of common grace based upon an epistemological dualism which splits reality into two distinct realms such as "heavenly things" and "earthly things." I will maintain that his reconstruction of the doctrine of common grace, put forward with the intent of purging it of its scholastic and rationalistic remnants, was less than satisfactory. It will be demonstrated that Van Til is working with a supralapsarian framework which subverts his desire to put forward a view of common grace which does justice to the dynamics of the historical process. Moreover, I will argue that Van Til's theology is set within an intellectualistic cast which has its roots in a faulty theory of epistemological limits and results in a tendency toward (what I will call) "hasty confessionalizing." This latter tendency, I maintain, accounts for Van Til's failure to develop an integral perspective on how, if, why, and to what extent, the Christian and the non-Christian are to cooperate in culture-formation.
Because Van Til is an apologist, much of his perspective comes by way of his critique of other perspectives. Therefore, the first chapter deals with his criticism of some reformed thinkers (including Calvin). In his criticism of Hepp, Bavinck, and Kuyper, we begin to catch a glimpse of how Van Til perceives the problem of common grace and how he intends to defend a Reformed theology which maintains a doctrine of common grace against the criticisms of Roman Catholic natural theology, specifically the critique of Calvinist thought by Etienne Gilson.

The second chapter deals with Van Til's attempt to put forward a constructive perspective on common grace. I have divided his views into the Structural/Static and the (attempted) Historical/Dynamic aspects of common grace. Under the former we will deal with how Van Til understands the framework within which man confronts and reacts to revelation, and the latter focuses on how he attempts to relate common grace to the historical process.

The final chapter is devoted to a brief note of appreciation for some of Van Til's insights with the remainder dedicated to a criticism of some elements of his theology which bear on the doctrine of common grace, particularly his theory of epistemological limits and his tendency toward "hasty confessionalizing." The chapter concludes with some suggestions on the common grace problem centering on common grace and history, the question of a common/holy distinction, and a view of the antithesis which does greater justice to the unregenerate contributions to culture than does Van Til.
I. HISTORICAL ORIENTATION

A. The Immediate Historical Context of Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace

The Kalamazoo Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 condemned Rev. Herman Hoeksema's denial of common grace by the formulation and adoption of what have come to be known as the Three Points. They are:

1. Concerning the first point, touching the favorable attitude of God toward mankind in general, and not alone toward the elect, Synod declares that it is certain, according to scripture and the Confession, that there is, besides the saving grace of God, shown only to those chosen to eternal life, also a certain favor or grace of God which he bestows to his creatures in general.

2. Concerning the second point, touching the restraint of sin in the life of the individual and in society, the Synod declares that...there is such a restraint of sin.

3. Concerning the third point, touching the performance of so-called civic righteousness by the unregenerate, the Synod declares that...the unregenerate, though incapable of any saving good...can perform such civic good.

The significance of this action by the Christian Reformed Church extends beyond what may appear to be an internal ecclesiastical squabble, for by this action the CRC became the first church to give an official and binding interpretation of common grace on the basis of the Reformed creedal position.

Sensitive to the responsibility that accompanied their action, Synod urged the church not to regard the Three Points as an exhaustive statement and called for further study and development of this doctrine. Except for Rev. Daniel Zwier's defense of the Three Points in De Wachter in the late 1930's against the criticisms of Klaas Schilder, the call for further
study and development received little response in North America. This all changed with the publication of Dr. Cornelius Van Til's little booklet entitled Common Grace in 1947. In his criticism of the traditional common grace thought of Kuyper, Bavinck, Hepp, Warfield, Machen and Berkhof, Van Til initiated an intense and heated debate within the North American Reformed community.

His position was supported occasionally and obliquely in The Banner and more frequently and directly in the magazine, Torch and Trumpet. He was critically challenged by William Masselink in his Common Grace and Education (1952), and by James Daane in his A Theology of Grace (1954), and in the Reformed Journal. Van Til's views were taken up and debated in The Calvin Journal with such intemperate heat and polemical fervor that the death of the journal was, at least in part, due to the controversy surrounding Van Til's perspective. Van Til took up a response to his critics in the first edition of his book The Defense of the Faith (1955), and responded directly to the attacks of Daane in his The Theology of James Daane (1959).

It is my opinion that the polemics and counter-polemics tended to generate quite a bit of heat but little light. This was the result, I believe, of failing to orient the question toward the central issue involved, namely: How does one maintain the doctrine of total corruption and emphasize the noetic effects of sin and yet account for the empirically obvious, good, and virtuous deeds and scientific contributions of unregenerate men. And, how does one do this and still reject a
scholastic notion of *naturalis ratio* and its concomitant, natural theology? Rather, the discussion tended to center upon the philosophical problems inherent to Van Til's formulation (which as I also will later maintain are indeed present within Van Til's understanding of common grace) at the expense of dealing with Van Til's primary motivation behind his construction of the doctrine i.e. a Reformed doctrine of common grace purified of and defendable against Roman Catholic natural theology.

Furthermore, I find it quite remarkable that little attention was given to a historical orientation of the discussion, especially to Calvin's view on the subject. While there was an open willingness to criticize fellow Calvinists there was also the unwillingness to come to grips with what the Reformer had to say on the subject. What may account for this "hands-off" attitude towards Calvin?

One may not, I propose, simply pass it off as a respectful deference to the Reformer. A more likely reason is the inherently sensitive nature of the topic. In the highly inflammatory debate, if one were to accuse Calvin of placing too much emphasis on a notion of *naturalis ratio* to account for the virtues of unregenerate men (as Van Til would accuse later Reformed orthodoxy) then one would open oneself to a charge of Barthianism, neo-orthodoxy, and irrationalism. If one were to argue on the other hand that Calvin rightly stressed an idea of *naturalis ratio* one would open oneself to the charge of scholastic rationalism. By simply affirming what Calvin said
(whatever it was!) one could more easily keep the label of Re­
formed orthodoxy and still make his theological point.

This leads us to question whether there are not conflicting
emphases in Calvin's treatment of this subject in the first
place. The fact that there has been considerable debate about
the nature of Calvin's position on the knowledge of God and that
various answers have been given about whether Calvin had a
"natural theology" seems to indicate that there are. If so,
could not these divergent themes have given rise to the different
views among Calvinian thinkers in regard to the common grace
question?

The following discussion of Calvin's view of common grace
(along with Van Til's rare comments on Calvin's views) will serve
to give historical orientation to the discussion of common
grace as seen by Van Til and will highlight the issues involved
in the question.
B. The Roots of the Problem--Calvin and Common Grace

Herman Bavinck in his essay "Calvin and Common Grace," noted that Calvin was "more generous in his recognition of what is true and good, wherever it may be found than any other Reformer." Calvin's theological standpoint does not render him "narrow in his sympathies, but rather gives to mind the stamp of catholicity." This is true enough. Our immediate concern, however, is to understand how Calvin accounts for the good virtues and insights of the unregenerate, totally corrupted men he is often willing to agree with.

Whatever ambiguities one may find in Calvin's treatment of this topic, at least this much is clear: Calvin saw no contradiction between the doctrine of total corruption and the affirmation of the virtues of the unregenerate. This is manifest in his discussion of these virtues in his Institutes of the Christian Religion when he takes up the question of these "virtues" in immediate connection with his exposition on the meaning of total corruption (Institutes II,3). Here Calvin attempts to show that man's nature produces nothing but that which is worthy of condemnation. Remarkably, it is in this chapter, entitled, "Only Damnable Things Come Forth From Man's Corrupt Nature," that Calvin brings forth examples to warn us "against adjudging man's nature wholly corrupted" (II,3,3)! He adds, moreover, that some men have "not only excelled in remarkable deeds, but conducted themselves most honorably throughout life" (II,3,3).
Calvin is faced with a dilemma. Should he deny these "virtues" or should he weaken his doctrine of total corruption? But Calvin avoids both horns of the dilemma. Within the corruption of man's nature there is still room for some kind of divine grace, not to cleanse the corruption but to hold it in check. It ought to occur to us, says Calvin, "that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God's grace; not such grace as to cleanse but to restrain it inwardly" (II,3,3).

He continues his argument in the following section (II,3,4) where he expressly mentions the gifts of God. While we must not ascribe to human nature the power to seek good as long as it is "impelled toward corruption," we must nevertheless not fail to consider the good gifts which God has given to man. And, the variation among men which results from the giving or withholding of gifts does not rule out our including the "good" man as well as the "evil" man in the universal description of man as evil. Clearly for Calvin the acknowledgement of the difference among men does not affect the doctrine of total corruption. This leads him to propose his answer:

Here, however, is the surest and easiest solution to this question; these are not common gifts of nature, but special graces of God, which he bestows variously and in a certain measure upon men otherwise wicked. For this reason, we are not afraid, in common parlance, to call this man wellborn, that one depraved in nature. Yet, we do not hesitate to include both under the universal condition of human depravity. (II,3,4)

As Berkouwer has observed, this means that any act or virtue
of man cannot be explained from some limitation of corruption, (cf. the uncorrupted reason in Roman Catholic dogma), but "only from the action of God, the act of His Grace."  

It seems however, that a complication arises when we consider that Calvin maintains the classical distinction between natural and supernatural gifts (II,2,12). Man, through the fall has lost the latter (faith, love, righteousness) but has kept the former (reason, judgment, will), though these were disfigured and darkened. However, this disfiguring or corruption of the natural gifts is not so extensive that we may judge man's reason to be completely blinded.

Since reason, therefore, by which man distinguishes between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be completely wiped out; but it was partly weakened and partly corrupted, so that its misshapen ruins appear. (II,2,12) (emphasis mine)

On this subject, Calvin left later Reformed theology and its defenders with some substantial problems. While Reformed orthodoxy sought to refer to the remnants of the imago Dei in terms of the wider and narrower image of God in man, they could not escape the charge of self-contradiction. How could one hold to total corruption, when in reality only part of the image was totally lost and part was partially corrupted?

The problem is that Calvin is working with the same anthropological framework which had led the scholastic Roman Catholic dogmaticians to reject the idea of total corruption. By ascribing to a so-called natural reason a certain autonomy over
against faith and revelation, traditional scholastic theology gave expression to the (false) Aristotelian view of reason as the center of human nature. Within the framework of Roman Catholic doctrine this caused few inner difficulties, because the radical character of the fall into sin and the resultant total depravity of man's nature (which was to receive great emphasis by the Reformers) were not accepted. For Calvin and later Reformed theology, however, this anthropological framework could not fail to cause an inner contradiction with the assertion of the doctrine of total corruption. 11

T.F. Torrance in his book Calvin's Doctrine of Man senses this tension in Calvin's anthropology and suggests that there is in fact an ultimate contradiction between Calvin's statements on corruption and the "remnants" of God's image remaining in man. I believe he is correct when he states:

It is difficult to see how there can be any ultimate reconciliation between Calvin's doctrine of total perversity and his doctrine of a remnant of the imago Dei, though the fact that he can give them both in the same breath seems to indicate that he had no difficulty reconciling them. That there is an ultimate inconsistency seems demanded by Calvin's denial that there is any seed of election or any germ of righteousness in fallen man. 13

If Calvin indeed holds to the view that our "whole nature is a seed of sin" which cannot for that very reason "but be hateful and abominable to God" (IV, 15, 10), then we must ask what reflection of God's glory does that leave to fallen man? How can we speak of a remnant of the image of God, if we cannot,
because of total corruption, speak of it in any meaningful sense as imaging God's glory?

There is a sense in which Calvin does speak of an external image of righteousness, or of a lifeless image, or an outward semblance, but there is no true righteousness or virtue here and nothing therefore that really images the glory of God. Along these lines, Calvin states that we must remember that the object at which righteousness aims is the service of God and whatever is of a different tendency forfeits the name. Hence, "as they have no regard to the end which the divine wisdom prescribes, although from the performance the act seems good, yet from the perverse motive it is sin" (III, 14, 3).

It appears that Calvin does not see the need to deny the existence of natural goodness as much as the need to repudiate it in the face of the total commitment and sacrifice demanded of all men by Christ. Yet, one wonders in what sense the depravity of the mind (the noetic affects of sin) works its way into the image of God in man in the wider sense?

The answer seems to lie, at least partially in one more distinction; that is, the distinction between "earthly things" and "heavenly things" (II, 2, 13). Upon close examination, it appears that the understanding of things terrestrial is nothing more than the image conceived in the broader sense while the understanding of things celestial refers to the image understood in the narrower sense. Thus, he calls "earthly things" that "which does not pertain to God or his Kingdom, to true
justice or to the blessedness of the future life; but which have their significance and relationship with regard to the present life and are, in a sense, confined within its bounds."

"Heavenly things" on the other hand are those things which pertain to the "pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom." The former includes such things as government, household management, all mechanical skills and liberal arts." The latter involves "the knowledge of God and of his will, and the rule by which we conform our lives to it" (II,2,13).

It is here that Van Til questions the efficacy of the distinction between earthly and heavenly things as employed by Calvin. Van Til is particularly concerned to point out that "as far as an ultimate point of view is concerned, the sinner has been mistaken in his interpretation of the physical universe no less than in his interpretation of God." That one's knowledge of the physical world is as basically mistaken as the knowledge of God, if the physical world is not brought into relation with God has been, according to Van Til, "greatly obscured in the history of Christian thought by a common distinction made between knowledge of natural things and knowledge of heavenly things." Too often, claims Van Til, this distinction has been brought forth and presented as though "Christians and non-Christians would then be different only in that the former, in addition to knowing earthly things also know heavenly things, while the latter know earthly things only." Even Calvin did
In typical Thomistic fashion, Gilson believes that it is only on the Catholic position in regard to the naturalis ratio completed by grace that justice can be done to St. Paul's statement that every man knows something of God without compromising the uniqueness of the Christian faith. Gilson, for example, argued that the fallen Aristotle, by the use of naturalis ratio could think of a God, "one first being, the supreme principle and cause of nature, the source of all intelligibility, of all order, and of all beauty, who eternally leads a life of happiness, because, being thought itself, it is an eternal contemplation of its own thought" who yet must be the God "precisely because there is no other" God.

Van Til takes a radical stand over against this type of apologetic. Here, as John Vriend has said, He "sets his jaw against the existence of God apart from his nature." We cannot intelligently speak about an existing "somewhat" apart from its "whatness". Denotation means nothing apart from connotation. The minute we assert "He is" the question arises "who is". And, it is only from an absolutely authoritative Bible that we learn who God is.

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 be known for what he is and known to the extent that he is known, by authority alone.

This implies that we must not first set out upon any theological endeavor without presupposing the God of the Scriptures. Thus, we do not set out to find our highest philosophical concept in terms of which we attempt to interpret reality and
then call this concept divine. This was, claimed Van Til, "the concept of the Greeks" and it was "from this process of reasoning that we have been redeemed." If we were to take the highest being of which we can think, "in the sense of have a concept of, and attribute it to actual existence we (would) not have the biblical notion of God." God is not to be considered as the reality which corresponds to the highest concept that man can think.

This refusal to separate God's existence from his nature is, of course, a flat rejection of the Thomistic apologetical method. Thomism "proves" God's existence by distilling from common sense an Unmoved Mover, First Cause or Ultimate Intelligence. But granting that it has proved such a First Cause etc., does this mean that it has proved the existence of God? Van Til answers with an unqualified NO. The best the natural man can do is come to the conclusion "that god is some abstract principle beyond the cosmos, is some unifying principle within the cosmos, or is identical with the cosmos." And, such a God, from the biblical point of view is an idol. Thus, the proofs as formulated on the basis of a so-called natural reason "cry out day and night that God does not exist. For as they have been constructed, they cry that a finite God exists."

What Van Til found most disagreeable about this methodology was that it assumed that man possessed the ability to reason independently of God, and thereby virtually asserts that there is in man some ultimate power that allows him to make a rational judgment about revelation. Various reformed thinkers,
for example Warfield, Hodge, Hepp, and to a lesser extent Kuyper and Bavinck, are criticized for failing to distinguish between man's original and fallen nature, and thus allowed reason to function in a relatively independent manner. He always insisted that it was natural that Roman Catholic and Arminian theology would be inclined to this type of methodology but claimed that it was out of accord with the foundational concepts of Reformed theology. Thus, he termed those who would employ the traditional Butler method of Apologetics as "less consistent Calvinists."  

Because Van Til places monumental stress upon the unified and perspicuous nature of God's revelation in both creation and Scripture, he claims that Thomas, Bishop Butler, and the Reformed scholastics were wrong when they contended that they had done justice to the evidence if they conclude that God probably exists. Van Til considers this a "compromise of a simple and fundamental Biblical truth" and claims that it is "an insult to the living God to say that his revelation so lacks in clarity that man...does justice to it when he says that God probably exists."

How could the eternal I AM be pleased with being presented as being a god and as probably existing, as necessary for the explanation of some things but not of all things, as one who will be glad to recognize the ultimacy of his own creatures?

As this quote suggests, the "probability argument" does not take into account the assumed autonomy of the unbeliever. He assumes that the "facts" of the created universe are not created but exist in themselves. Or, it is at least claimed
that the facts of the created universe can be something other than that which is revelatory of God. And this is in effect to posit chance as equally ultimate with God. Thus, to say that the evidence when fully considered, merely shows that God probably exists, is tantamount to saying that he does not exist at all.  

To ask whether the triune God of Scripture exists and whether the space-time world is what it is because of this God, is to presuppose that abstract possibility is back of God. A God of whom it is possible to ask intelligently whether he exists is not the God of Scripture.... It is an insult to this God to argue for his possible existence. An argument for his possible existence presupposes the idea that he may possibly not exist. But the God of the Scriptures tells us that he cannot possibly not exist. He presents himself as the self-referential source of all that exists in the universe.  

We must not simply state that the heavens probably declare the glory of God.  

In short, if revelation testifies to the existence of the true God, the triune God of the Scriptures, it testifies against the existence of such gods as men have made for themselves, often by means of the theistic proofs. In fact, Van Til holds that one of the most subtle and effective ways that the natural man can suppress the revelation of the true God is by "proving the existence of God" to himself.

By that means he makes an idol for himself. Worshipping his idol, his god, he seeks to make himself believe that he has done all that may be expected of him.  

D. The "Witness Value" of the Proofs--In Critique of Hinn  

Van Til also refuses to recognize the proofs as having a
"witness value." Therefore, in his book *Common Grace*, he takes Valentine Hepp to task for not being radical enough in his critique of the proofs. By claiming that these proof "cry out day and night that God exists," Hepp, Van Til claims, falls into a sort of crypto-natural theology.

Van Til's critique of Hepp's position runs roughly along these lines: Hepp was correct when in asking "what is the ground of direct certainty?", he rejects both subjectivism (because it leads to the self-sufficiency of human thought) and objectivism (because it does injustice to man as the bearer of God's image and in the end leads to fatalism). Because subjectivism and objectivism are both objectionable, Hepp concludes that there is a missing link in the doctrine of knowledge. Because the foundations of our certainty are not found within the boundaries of creation, they must lie deeper. Here, Hepp finds a negative proof for the necessity of positing the "missing link" which is the general testimony of the Spirit. It is here that Van Til begins to pick up on the rationalizing tendency in Hepp's argument.

Van Til points out that for Hepp, the general testimony assures one of central truths only. These central truths do not relate to one another as members of a hierarchy. They are relatively independent of one another. There are three groups of central truths, those pertaining to God, to man and to the world.

It is in connection with the general truths pertaining to God that Hepp discusses the value of the theistic proofs. These
proofs, he argues, put into set formulas that which comes to us from the cosmos as a whole. They press with power upon our consciousness but cannot give us certainty. Certainty, claimed Hepp cannot be derived from revelation, since revelation comes through media, whether subjective or objective. (Hepp insisted that the two concepts, revelation and assurance, be kept rigidly apart.) Without the general testimony of the Spirit there can be no certainty.

Thus, Hepp argues that certainty comes from a marriage of the general testimony of the Spirit and general revelation.

From the marriage of the general testimony and revelation (here taken in its wide significance of God-revelation, man-revelation, and cosmos-revelation) faith is born. Whenever the internal testimony attests to the external testimony, man cannot withhold his assent. And faith always consists of giving assent by means of one's reason to some witness or another. Hepp calls this faith, fides generalis. And, it is from this fides generalis, resulting from a marriage of general revelation and the general testimony of the Spirit, that men can accept the general truths about God, man, and the cosmos. Thus, Hepp can say that:

Taken generally mankind does not deny the central truths. By far the greater majority of men recognize a higher power above themselves and do not doubt the reality within and beyond themselves.

This is, Van Til points out, the climax of the whole matter. The bottom line is that there are central truths to which the generality of mankind, because of the irresistible power of the Spirit's internal general testimony, must of necessity give their consent.
But, argues Van Til, this is in reality a lapse into the natural theology of Romanism. Hepp's whole doctrine of the general testimony of the Spirit is constructed with the purpose of showing that there are certain general truths on which all men agree. Non-Christians as well as Christians can, he argues, correctly interpret God's revelation. And they can put this revelation into set formulas as is done with the theistic proofs. Thus they can and do believe in certain central truths. This means that together they can interpret God's general revelation and together come to the same conclusion, namely, that God exists.

The results of such reasoning are, in Van Til's opinion, nothing short of disastrous. The doctrine of the general testimony of the Spirit, so constructed, is no cure for, or escape from natural theology. Hepp wrongly assumes that the natural man, even on his own interpretive principle, can and does correctly interpret the revelation of God correctly on central questions. This implies that there is an area of revelation which believers and non-believers together interpret correctly. And this in turn implies that there is a neutral territory, "a 'territory between,' where men can positively build together on the house of science."52

The implication in this is that in this "neutral area" the Holy Spirit does not testify to the non-believer that he must turn from idols to serve the living God. On the contrary, in this neutral area the Spirit testifies that both believer and non-believer are correct in believing in God. Somewhat sarcastically, Van Til observes that this would seem to imply
that:

The Spirit, as it were, testifies to Calvin that he is right in thinking of God as his Creator and Judge, and also testifies to Spinoza that he is right in believing in the existence of God as identical with all reality. 53

Or, if this is not the case, then the Spirit must testify to the contentless form of God. In other words, it must testify to the fact that God exists without any indication as to what is the nature of God. But, again Van Til argues that "the idea that the Spirit should testify to the existence of a finite god, or to the existence of a mere form, devoid of content, is directly contrary to Scripture." It is only to the true God as Creator, Judge, and controller of all things that the Spirit testifies. Moreover, this implies that the Spirit in "testifying to the existence of this God it testifies against the existence of such gods as men have made for themselves, often by means of the 'theistic proofs'." 54

Van Til contends that a doctrine of common grace constructed along these lines, so as to appeal to a neutral territory between believers and non-believers is, precisely like Old Princeton apologetics, in line with Romanist type of natural theology. Why should, on this basis, Reformed Christians pretend to have anything unique? How could Reformed Christians justify their own independent educational institutions? Van Til seems to argue that they cannot, in fact, be justified, unless a militant approach is taken with respect to any appeal to a so-called common ground that would mitigate the spiritual antithesis.
E. The Question of Innate Knowledge of God--In Critique of Bavinck

Although Van Til believes that Herman Bavinck "has given us the greatest and most comprehensive statement of the Reformed systematic theology in modern times," this does not prevent him from leveling some fundamental criticism at some key points in Bavinck's theology where he believes that a compromise was made to natural theology. While his radical opposition to the natural theology of Rome is recognized, Van Til held that his moderate realism produced a certain ambiguity in his thought about "commonality" and hindered a thoroughgoing critique of natural theology. Van Til particularly focuses in on Bavinck's notion of the cognitio Dei insita. Van Til asks whether Bavinck's understanding of innate knowledge can escape the dilemma before which Gilson has placed the Calvinist. Van Til is convinced that it can not.

Bavinck, claims Van Til, seems to attribute too much value to belief in abstractions. Van Til finds the following passage from Bavinck's Dogmatics particularly objectionable.

Every science presupposes general principles which exist in their own right. All knowledge rests upon faith. All proof presupposes, in the last analysis, an $\xi\nu\gamma\varphi\varepsilon \chi\rho\iota\kappa\omicron\sigma\iota\tau\sigma\nu\iota\varsigma$ & $\phi\iota\varsigma\omicron\varphi\alpha\tau\omicron$. There are logical, mathematical, philosophical, ethical and thus also religious and theological principles, which are to be sure, very abstract, but which are accepted by all men in all ages and which have a character of naturalness and necessity.... the distinction between good and bad is known to all; there is no people without religion and knowledge of God. This is not to be explained otherwise than by the acceptance of principia per se notae, $\kappa\omicron\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu\zeta\nu$, veritas aeternae, which are imprinted naturally on the human spirit.
And, when he says "as a man, opening his eyes, sees the sun and in its light sees the objects in the world about him, so man must in accordance with his nature, when he hears that there is a God, that there is a difference between good and evil, etc. give his assent to these truths," Van Til sees a compromise with a non-Christian concept of natural theology.

Had Bavinck simply said that the true God has not left himself without a witness anywhere, that he has "spoken to man even through the depth of his self-conscious activity," Van Til would not have objected. But, when he asserts that on the basis of the every man when he hears that there is a God and when he hears that there is a difference between good and evil must give his assent to these truths, he is dealing with meaningless abstractions.

But how can Bavinck say that formal abstractions such as the existence of a God and the idea of difference between good and evil as purely formal statements, are truths? If they are to be spoken of as having content...the question must be faced whence this content comes. If it comes from the revelation of God, if the revelation that there is a God comes from the God, if the idea of the that is to have significance given it because it comes from the what of God's revelation, then we cannot say that all men by nature will accept it, and as a consequence have a certain amount of true information about God.

Again, Van Til stresses the fact that there are no general truths or principles about the true God which the sinner does not falsify. The very idea of the existence of abstract truths about God is in itself a distortion of the revelation of God which man finds within and about himself. Bavinck at times works too much with a distinction between the existence and nature of God. Thus,
Van Til finds that the innate knowledge of Bavinck and the common notions of Gilson are not very different, with the result that a Reformed theology so constructed cannot escape the dilemma before which Gilson has placed the Calvinist.

F. The Extent of the Antithesis--In Critique of Kuyper

Van Til openly avows his indebtedness to Abraham Kuyper. "It is from Kuyper," says Van Til, "more than from anyone else in modern times, that we have learned to think concretely." Yet while Kuyper's own most basic views require us to "stress the difference in starting point between those who do, and those who do not, work on the basis of regeneration," there remains nevertheless, a "vagueness inherent in Kuyper's treatment of common grace."

At the root of Kuyper's thought lies the radical nature and extent of the spiritual antithesis. This is what Van Til so highly prizes in the thought of Kuyper. For Kuyper, the religious attitude which lies at the heart of each man's formulation of his total world of experience determines the orientation and thus the organization of that world-and-life view. There are basically two alternatives: love of truth or love of lie, child of God or child of Satan, Christian or non-Christian system of knowledge.

Moreover, Kuyper did not wish to restrict the extent of the antithesis to a mere theological formulation but was intent to show how, because of the fact of regeneration, there must be a two fold development of science. Thus he said that, "the Christian must maintain the unity of the sciences in truth and this truth as opposed to the unity of the pagan science in lie...the negative
for the one determines the positive for the other. 65

This is also continually affirmed by Van Til when he, for instance, insists that there are two classes of men, covenant keepers and covenant breakers. Yet, while Van Til openly avows indebtedness to Kuyper he seeks to pay his respects as Franz states, "not by slavish imitation but by further elucidation of the problem." 66

Van Til believes that there are difficulties in Kuyper's formulation of the antithesis which tend to rob his brilliant insights of their full effects. In Van Til's mind, Kuyper fails to express adequately the full antithesis of pagan and Christian thought in the way that he brought out the possibility of formal agreement between pagan and Christian.

Kuyper specifies some of the formal areas of agreement, including in this the activity of arithmetic, weighing and measuring, and logic. On the ground of these basic territories Kuyper makes the following generalization:

The bifurcation must extend as far as the influence of these subjective factors which pal- ingenesis causes to be different in one than in the other. Hence all scientific research which has seen things only as object or which is prosecuted simply by those subjective factors which have undergone no change, remains the same for both. Near the ground, the tree of science is one for all. 67

It is this distinction of "formal agreement" which Van Til finds so disagreeable. Van Til interprets this to mean that there are some areas in the field of knowledge which by their supposed objective character are exempt from the noetic effects of sin. The "lie" does not work its way into these "lower sciences." He points out that Kuyper argues for the commonness of the territories on
the basis of their interpretive insignificance. Thus Van Til says:

We are to hold according to Kuyper's argument, that, where sin has not changed the metaphysical situation, the difference between the believer and unbeliever need not be brought to the fore. This is, in effect, to say that, to the extent that the objective situation has not changed, the subjective change need not be taken into account. 68

Now, why does Van Til make so much of this seemingly minor epistemological point? Again, Van Til is haunted by the spectre of natural theology. Thus he insists that in the interpretive endeavor the "objective situation" can never be abstracted from the "subjective situation." If we do abstract it, we fall back on the Scholastic position. Van Til has a sort of "domino theory" with respect to epistemological commonness. Once one field of knowledge is surrendered, more territories must fall to natural theology, reason, and abstract logic.

Any area of commonness, that is, any area of commonness without qualification, however small, is a justification for larger areas of commonness, till at last there is but one common area. The only valid answer to the Roman Catholic is to say that in the whole of the area of interpretive endeavor the subjective difference makes its influence felt. Weighing and measuring and formal reasoning are but aspects of one unified act of interpretation. 69 (emphasis mine)

In order to obviate the weaknesses he saw in Kuyper's position Van Til proposed that a clearer distinction be made with respect to the epistemological (i.e. the human interpretive endeavor) and the metaphysical (ontological) situation.

James Daane, A Theology of Grace. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954, p. 15. The Synod supported its position by appeal to both the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort.

The contents of Common Grace had appeared earlier in the "Westminster Theological Journal" and still earlier in 1941 in "The Proceedings of the Calvinist Philosophy Club." The book was later republished under the title Common Grace and the Gospel (1972) and included several chapters in which Van Til clarified his views and sought to refute the criticisms of his opposition. Hereafter cited as CG.

R.J. Rushdoony probably overstates his case when he states in his monograph Van Til (Philipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) p. 17, that it was directly the cause of the death of "The Calvin Forum." The untimely death of its editor Jesse DeBoer and the decline of subscriptions were cited as the reasons by the journal itself.

I have chosen not to dwell at any length on the various reactions to Van Til's views on common grace. They have come from several different perspectives and so many different charges were leveled at Van Til that an adequate survey would take us beyond the scope of this study. He has been accused of being an existentialist (Daane), an idealist (DeBoer), and a member of the (then) new Vollenhovian and Dooyeweerdian philosophy in Amsterdam. More recently he has been charged with neo-orthodox Barthianism (Gordon Clark).

For a brief survey on the debate within Calvin scholarship on this matter see R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley's Classical Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp.198 ff.

Herman Bavinck, "Calvin and Common Grace" in Calvin and the Reformation, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) p. 120. This is a reprint from the "Princeton Theological Review," 1909.


Ibid.
Herman Dooyeweerd argues this point at length in his In The Twilight of Western Thought (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960).

I believe Berkouwer dismisses this objection of Torrance too quickly. He seems over-anxious to defend Calvin at this point. Ibid. 151.


Ibid.


IST. p. 82.

Ibid.

IST. p. 83

Ibid.

Van Til approvingly quotes Herman Kuiper's statement from his Calvin on Common Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930) p. 226 where he says, "We also refuse to subscribe to Calvin's teaching in II,2,17 to the effect that the fall of man would have resulted in the destruction of our whole nature, including our reasoning power if God had not spared us. Calvin here seems to forget that the revolt in the world of angels did not have for its result that the devils have lost all reasoning ability, and he also leaves out of consideration the fact that the lost souls who will one day inhabit the place of torment will remain men and will retain a certain measure of intellectual power." IST. p. 255.

Bavinck, op. cit. p. 123.

Ibid., p. 124.

Torrance, op. cit. p. 95

25 Ibid.


30 CG. p. 8.

31 Ibid.

32 IST. p. 206

33 CG. p. 180.

34 CG. 61


37 IST. p. 126

38 DF (1967) p. 257

39 Van Til's understanding of "facthood" will be dealt with below p. 45 ff.

40 DF. (1955) p. 64.


42 CG. p. 61.

43 CTK. p. 16.
Valentine Hepp was Herman Bavink's successor and G.C.
Berkouwer's predecessor in the chair of systematic theology
in the Free University of Amsterdam.

CG. p. 58 ff. See also Van Til's syllabus Apologetics p. 43 ff.
and also William Young's excellent analysis of the issues
of contention between Hepp and Van Til, and between Hepp
and the advocates of the Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee. op. cit. p. 86 f:

As cited in CG. p. 61.

As cited in CG. p. 59.

As cited in CG. p. 60

Ibid.

CG. p. 193.

CG. p. 193.

CG. p. 194. Van Til goes on to argue that he rejects Hepp's
argument for the proofs for the same reason that he rejected
the apologetics of "Old Princeton." He seems to be implying
that Hepp's views on the proofs and common grace were just
a bit more covert than that of Warfield, Hodge et. al.

Ibid. p. 31.

CG. p. 51.

As cited in CG. p. 55.

Ibid. p. 56

Ibid.

Ibid. p. 57.

Ibid. p. 35.

Ibid. p. 41.

Ibid. p. 40.

As cited by H.J. Franz "On Brute Facts" in The Calvin Forum XX
(April, 1955) p. 182.

Ibid.

CG. p. 42. cf. Franz Ibid.
Franz attempted to show in the article we have cited that Van Til and Kuyper were really insisting upon the same viewpoint, Van Til's criticism of Kuyper notwithstanding. He points out that Van Til failed to take note of Kuyper's distinction between truth-falsehood and accuracy-error. Nevertheless he argued that while Van Til was wrong in his criticism, he was "right in his intent and he faithfully preserved the significance of Kuyper's viewpoint." op. cit. p. 184.
II. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DOCTRINE OF COMMON GRACE

I have chosen to examine Van Til's perspective on the common grace question under two main headings. The first I will call the structural/static aspect and the second the dynamic/historical aspect. These headings are not intended to be taken as clear-cut conceptual distinctions because under the former heading a directional or dynamic element is present (the ethical response of the human subject) and under the latter, the dynamic/historical feature of common grace is actually subverted by Van Til's static supralapsarian/theologiclastic concept formation. Nevertheless, the headings are useful for organizational purposes in that the first section allows us to focus on how Van Til understands the given framework with which man confronts revelation and the second focuses on how he attempts to relate common grace to the historical process.
A. The Structural/Static Aspect of Common Grace

Van Til insists that it is imperative to "distinguish between man's knowledge of God by virtue of the revelational character of all created reality, himself included, and the natural man's being without God in the world and blind because of sin." In this respect, we may note that perhaps Van Til's most important assumption is the perspicuity of God's general revelation. All fault for not seeing God (that is, the one true God of the Scriptures) in creation is due exclusively to the human subject. Thus, he maintains that men are inherently and originally in possession of the truth about God. In fact, this knowledge of God which all men possess is the presupposition upon which man's absolute ethical depravity rests.

1. Commonality and the Knowledge of God

Before we proceed, I will introduce the following diagram to aid the explication of Van Til's point in this matter.

The first thing to note is how Van Til exegetes Romans 1:18-21. The key points to observe in this passage are (1) that Paul says that men actually in some sense see the truth. But,
he claims that we do not do this passage justice by merely saying that all or most men believe in a God or believe that God probably exists.

Paul says that the revelation of the only existing God is so clearly imprinted upon man himself and upon his environment that no matter how hard he tries he cannot suppress this fact. As psychologically active self-conscious creatures they must see something of the truth. They hold down the truth, to be sure, but it is the truth that they hold down.

This means that for Van Til the sensus divinitatis, or the psychological knowledge of God (left side of the diagram) is not merely a smidgen of knowledge about God but is the clear revelation of God within man's own conscience.

The reason for Van Til's employment of the term "psychological" is not very clear. But it seems that he uses it to distinguish the (general) revelation of God as it comes subjectively through the human subject from the revelation which comes through nature. Hence, it could be said that under the broad category of "general revelation" there are the subcategories of subjective knowledge (psychological) and objective knowledge (from "nature" outside of man). Hence, the truth to which Paul refers is not only objectively placed before men in nature and the make-up of man but

knowledge is also in man in the sense that his subjective reaction to that which he sees shows some acquaintance with the truth. The invisible things of God are perceived (kathoratai). Knowing God (knowes ton theon), they have not glorified God.
By including the original subjective condition of man in the very concept of revelation, Van Til seeks to emphasize the exclusively ethical nature of sin. It also serves as a polemic against the idea that a metaphysical notion such as the donum superadditum is necessary to give man a knowledge of God and a moral consciousness. Such knowledge is given at creation and hence man is morally responsible. His disobedience then is exclusively ethical in that he sins against better knowledge and refuses to acknowledge what he knows to be the truth.

(2) It is primarily in regard to the fact that men do know and yet do not live up to what they know that Paul sees the greatest folly. While it is true that God's wrath is displayed wherever sin is found, it is specifically mentioned in this context that God displays his wrath because men hold down the truth.

It is important to note that Van Til considers this revelation of God as being "always objectively valid." Sin in no way destroys the validity of God's revelation. With Calvin, Van Til argues that men ought to see, even from the vanity and corruption of nature (including himself), the evidence of God's presence, that is, of God's presence in judgment. Yet, man suppresses this revelation, and he uses several different techniques to do so. Involuntarily there surges up within his conscience the testimony of the Spirit to the existence of God. Yet man,

does his best to suppress this testimony; he seeks psychological explanation for it; if
highly sophisticated and educated, he may succeed to a large extent in searing his conscience with a hot iron. If not highly sophisticated he will express agreement with the idea that there is a God in a formal fashion; that he may do the works of the law, and so seek to ease his conscience. 5

Van Til does not hesitate to speak of this internal general revelation within man which persists in cropping up despite the attempt of sinful man to keep it under as being innate knowledge. But in so doing, he insists that we must be very careful to distinguish between what Christians mean by such a term and what is meant by all non-Christian philosophies. He particularly alludes to the innate ideas of Descartes and the resemblance theory of Plato. Both Plato and Descartes wrongly assumed that man can to a large extent obtain knowledge simply by eliciting what is in himself, apart from God. Both hold to positions which are contrary to the Christian position in that they do not presuppose revelation. 6

And what is true of Descartes the rationalist, also holds for the empiricists. For them, the mind was a tabula rasa. However, the mind of man created in the image of God cannot, says Van Til, be a tabula rasa. Such a notion assumes that man does not stand in an entirely revelational context. When Adam was created, he at once reacted to the testimony of God which was within and around him. And fallen man cannot help but react to that testimony. From this Van Til concludes:

We cannot say that the innate knowledge of God in man is the mere formal ability, the capacity of potentiality, in view of man's creation as an intellectual being, to recognize revelation if and when it comes. There can be no finite human
consciousness that is not stirred to its depths by the revelational content within itself as well as about itself. Thus the innate knowledge deals with thought content, and not with mere formality. 7

It is in this sense that Van Til interprets the Reformed confessions when they speak of "remnants" of the image of God. Van Til recognizes (quite correctly I believe) that the idea of remnants (reliquiae and vistigia) is a dangerous one because it has sometimes been interpreted in such a way as to impinge upon the Calvinist notion of total depravity. This is because the notion of "remnants" has been taken too often as referring to a "neutral territory" of interpretation which is common between believers and unbelievers. (That is, that which is metaphysically and psychologically common—the left side of our diagram—is confused with that which is wholly antithetical—the ethical and epistemological.) Taken as such, it is destructive of the doctrine of total depravity.

Taken properly, however, the idea of remnants presupposes and expresses "the universal presence of the revelation of God." Note that for Van Til the idea of "remnants" seems to be a synonym for the revelation of God in man. Thus, the idea of remnants stresses "the fact of the inescapable presence of the face of God to every man." 8

Taken as such, any idea of "common notions" may be thought of as nothing more than "revelation that comes to man through man." This revelation, of course, requires an ethical response, yet after the fall, man "acts negatively with respect to this revelation" (he suppresses it). 9
Here Van Til is willing to affirm Bavinck's statement that "there is no atheistic world, there are no atheistic peoples, and there are no atheistic men,"\(^{10}\) as long as one is careful to understand this psychologically and not epistemologically. Thus, he says that "psychologically there are no atheistic men, epistemologically every sinner is atheistic."\(^{11}\)

We must, claims Van Til, make "a clear-cut, ringing distinction between that which is psychologically revelational and that which is epistemologically interpretive."\(^{12}\) This distinction is necessary because although there are "common notions" psychologically speaking, "it does not follow that there are such things as 'common notions' epistemologically speaking."\(^{13}\) In other words, the commonness having been responded to results in an absolute ethical and epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever. Van Til is very clear on this point.

All men have a sense of deity, but there is no man who has not at the same time also something else that at once colors his sense of deity. All men are either in covenant with Satan or in covenant with God. The former invariably seek to suppress and therefore always misinterpret the general sense of deity within them. The latter invariably seek to relate that sense of deity to the revelation of God in Christ. While therefore it is of the utmost consequence to recognize the fact of a "common consciousness" of God as the revelational pressure of God on man, it is no less importance that, insofar as men are aware of their basic alliances, they are wholly for or wholly against God at every point of interest to man.\(^{14}\)

To ignore or to compromise this distinction is to confuse natural revelation with natural theology (wrongly conceived as a formal assent to the mere existence of God).
2. The Ethical/Epistemological Antithesis

In this section we shall explicate Van Til's understanding of the ethical/epistemological antithesis (the right side of our diagram). Our first concern is to explain the relation of the terms "ethical" and "epistemological".

When Van Til says that sin is "ethical" he does not mean that sin merely involves the will of man and not also his intellect. In fact, the exact opposite is the case. To stress the noetic effects of sin (over against natural theology) he emphasizes the ethical antithesis. The "intellectual" is included in the broader concept of the "ethical".

Sin involved every aspect of man's personality. All of man's reactions in every relation in which God had set him were ethical and not merely intellectual; the intellectual itself is ethical.

In this manner Van Til rejects the sharp dichotomy between the ethical and the epistemological favored by some reformed theologians. The latter tend to maintain that the difference between the Christian and non-Christian is ethical with no fundamental difference in their ratiocination. But Van Til seeks to maintain the antithesis even in the reasoning process.

By so describing the nature and extent of the antithesis, Van Til then seeks to address the problem of how God can give natural blessings to those who are children of his wrath. He proposes that (as with many other theological problems) the best one can do is "hem in the question." In regard to this question Van Til insists that "we must begin by emphasizing the absolute ethical antithesis in which the "natural man" stands to (sic) God."
At this point Van Til takes aim at the scholastic distinction between natural and heavenly things. He claims that it is on this point that too many theologians have been vague. It may seem, says Van Til, as though it is straining at a gnat to insist on the point that the natural man does not even know the flowers truly, as long as he does not know God truly. However, the point is

that unless we maintain that the natural man does not know the flowers truly, we cannot logically maintain that he does not know God truly. All knowledge is inter-related. The created world is expressive of the nature of God. If one knows "nature" truly, one also knows nature's God truly. Then, too, the mind of man is a unit. It cannot know one thing truly without knowing all things truly.

Thus, "from an ultimate point of view," "the sinner has been-mistaken in his interpretation of the physical universe no less than in his interpretation of God."  

That the physical world, the facts, or the particulars of experience, cannot be truly known when it is cut loose and not "related to God" has been greatly obscured in the history of Christian thought by a common distinction made between knowledge of natural things and heavenly things.

For Van Til the difference between the believer and unbeliever is not confined to the question concerning the existence of God but to the entire field of knowledge. As Rushdoony has observed, this emphasis upon the fundamental disagreement (antithesis) as to the nature of all knowledge "constitutes the originality of Van Til's insight as well as the offense of his position."
John Vander Stelt makes a great deal of the philosophical roots of this emphasis in Van Til's theology. In his book, *Philosophy and Scripture*, Vander Stelt points out that Van Til came to this insight with help from formal (and in Vander Stelt's view, substantive) patterns of thought in idealism, particularly of neo-idealists such as Bradley, Bosanquet, and Bowman. It was from them that Van Til "perceived the need for a comprehensive a priori in order for one to have any knowledge at all, to be able to place the particular within the context of the whole," or (in Van Til's own words) to "relate a new fact to the system of facts already known," and to acknowledge that particulars (or facts, or individuality) are dependent on relations to other facts within the larger and prior context of some unified absolute.

Thus, Van Til maintained that the idealists were formally correct when they clearly saw and maintained that:

> Every statement about any fact is by implication a statement about reality as a whole. For a fact is...what it is by virtue of the relationships it sustains to other facts and to itself at other times and places.

Similarly, under their influence Van Til accepted (at least formally) the coherence theory of truth, and rejected the empiricist notion of truth determined by the criteria of correspondence, that is, of a point-to-point relationship in which "truth is a matter of the copula rather than the predicate." And, he affirmed the principles of coherence according to which the fact and the interpretation of it cannot be separated. By "coherence" he means knowing the whole before the parts. Thus, knowledge is true only when one knows the place of the part in terms of the whole.
Vander Stelt suggests that Van Til has "fused A. Kuyper's emphasis on the ethical or religious antithesis and the idealistic notion of the logic of coherence and implication." With this one must concur as long as the verb "fused" is not taken in a necessarily pejorative sense. Later I will argue that this idealistic influence did have a very negative effect on Van Til's theology in general and his view of common grace in particular. However, the point must not be pushed in regard to his stress on the antithesis. One must not miss Van Til's principal point here. He is attempting in this way to emphasize the thoroughly Calvinian notion that man stands in all his doings in covenant relation with the God with whom he has to do.

All too easily do we think of the covenant relation as quite distinct and independent of natural (or general) revelation. The two should be joined together. To speak of man's relation to God as being covenantal at every point is merely to say that man deals with the personal God everywhere. Every manipulation of any created fact is, as long as man is not a sinner, a covenant affirming activity. Every manipulation of any fact, as soon as man is a sinner, is a covenant-breaking activity. Thus Van Til thundered against any notion of brute factuality. If, he argued, there are no brute facts, it must be maintained that all facts are revelational of the true God. For if facts may not be separated from faith, neither may faith be separated from facts. Not to maintain that to some degree every created fact expresses the attitude of God to man is to fall back into a natural theology.

For it is to hold to the idea of brute fact after all. And with the idea of brute fact goes that of neutral reason. A fact not revelational of God is revelational only of itself.
Thus Van Til insists that there can be no single territory or dimension of life which believers and non-believers have in common because even the description of facts in the lower dimensions, such as mathematics, "presupposes a system of metaphysics and epistemology."  

But lest absolutist conclusions be drawn from this, Van Til adds that when it is said that epistemologically Christians and non-Christians have nothing in common, "it is meant to hold only to the extent that men are self-consciously engaged in the interpretive enterprise." That is, to the extent that the non-Christian is not true to his own autonomous principles of either pure contingency or abstract timeless logic there can be incidental commonness, or commonness "after a fashion", or commonness "up to a point", between believers and unbelievers.

Van Til seems to suggest that there is a hierarchy or gradation of epistemological self-consciousness in the sciences. The unbeliever is not as conscious of his own most basic assumptions about reality in the lower dimensions as he is in the higher. He is not epistemologically self-conscious because the restraining activity of the sense of deity (i.e. the revelational presence of God in man) prevents him from being fully consistent.

As the Christian sins against his will, so the natural man "sins against" his own essentially Satanic principle. As the Christian has the incubus of his "old man" weighing him down and therefore keeping him from realizing the "life of Christ" within him, so that natural man has the incubus of the sense of deity weighing him down and keeping him from realizing the life of Satan within him.
To sum up, Van Til maintains that that which is common without qualification is the metaphysical (ontological) situation of both believer and unbeliever upon which is based the ethical cleavage in which nothing is common. Any mitigation of this antithesis is due to the "pressure" of the metaphysical commonness (including the "psychological" knowledge of God or the sensus divinitatis).
3. The Apparently Contradictory and the Limiting Concept

Recognizing the tendency of Reformed thought to so easily "fall back into scholastic ways of thinking", Van Til argues that to escape this tendency we should "learn to think less statically and more historically." Over against a scholastic notion which tends to view commonality in terms of some sort of (rational) agreement in (what Van Til called) the lower dimensions of reality, Van Til argues for a view of common grace which emphasizes its historical dimension more than the higher-lower dimension.

Before I explicate in detail how Van Til attempted to orient the discussion toward a more dynamic perspective, it will be necessary to explain how he came to take this view in opposition to the positions of Klaas Schilder and Herman Hoeksema. Both of these men rejected the doctrine of common grace (as expressed in the Kalamazoo Synod) as a compromise of the doctrine of total corruption. We will use Van Til's critique of these men as a portal into this side of Van Til's construction of a more historical view of common grace. This in turn will serve to bring out two crucial ideas of Van Til: that of the limiting concept and of the apparently contradictory.

It is not necessary to deal in detail with Schilder's and Hoeksema's views on the common grace question except to say that they both took a stand over against the Synod of Kalamazoo and argued that God cannot have any favorable attitude
at any stage of history to such who are reprobate and vessels of wrath. Van Til opposed both men contending that we must think more concretely than they did, "allowing ourselves to be led by only Scriptural exegesis."

Van Til argued through an exegesis of Psalm 145:9; Matt. 5:34-35; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16-17; and I Tim. 4:10 that the Scriptures clearly indicate that God has a certain favorable attitude towards all men. Schilder and Hoeksema did not admit to this because, on the basis of a static logic, they allowed the Biblical teaching concerning total corruption to stand in the way of recognizing this clear Biblical teaching. But to so reason argued Van Til, is to "make logic rule over Scripture."

In short, he charges them with logicism.

Our concern is to determine how Van Til criticized this logicism. For while I will maintain that Van Til was certainly correct in maintaining the concept of common grace against Hoeksema and Schilder, I will question the way he did it.

Here Van Til appeals to his notions of the apparently contradictory and of the limiting concept. This forms the basis of what I will call Van Til's theory of epistemological limits. Through these notions Van Til maintains that the doctrines of total corruption and common grace are "apparently contradictory".

Van Til bases his view of the apparently contradictory on the incomprehensibility of God. Because man's mind is finite, he cannot have a comprehensive knowledge of God. But this does not mean that he cannot have true knowledge. True knowledge
is possible because of God's revelation. But comprehensive knowledge or complete exhaustive knowledge is impossible for man because it is only possible for God himself.\textsuperscript{43}

But it is not only man's knowledge of God that is not comprehensive, neither is his knowledge of all finite things. Van Til argues that although the world is finite, it should not be assumed that it is fully comprehensible because it must be interpreted in relation to God who is infinite.

The object of knowledge is not interpreted truly if though brought into relation with the human mind, it is not also brought into relation with the divine mind. God is the ultimate category of interpretation. Now we cannot fully understand God's plan for created things and so we cannot fully understand things.\textsuperscript{44}

The infinity of God makes it impossible to comprehensively understand finite things in the created universe.

Now, Van Til argues that since every knowledge transaction has in it somewhere a reference to God, and since God is not fully comprehensible to us "we are bound to come into what seems to be contradiction in all our knowledge."\textsuperscript{45} We are bound to come to a contradiction because the absence of contradiction implies pure rationality which is only found in God. But to this he quickly adds that there can be no more than a seeming or apparent contradiction. "While we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory we embrace with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory."\textsuperscript{46} It is apparent because it is really not contradictory in the mind of God.
If we said that there is a real contradiction in our knowledge we would once more be denying the basic concept of Christian theism, i.e., the concept of the self-complete universal in God. We should then not merely be saying that there is no complete coherence in our thinking but we should also be saying that there is no complete coherence in God's thinking. And this would be the same as saying that there is no coherence or truth in our thinking at all. 47

This statement must be understood in light of the perspective on logic taken by Van Til's philosophical mentors, British neo-idealists F.H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet. They held that logic was that science which dealt with the conditions of logical stability rather than solely with the laws of mutual implication between propositions. By "conditions of logical stability" was meant "truth as that characteristic of a system of propositions which make it free from self-contradiction and from contradiction with the rest of experience." 48 It is the position that a proposition holds within a system that determines the logical stability (or lack thereof) of the proposition itself. It is thus the system, conceived of as rationally coherent, which is crucial for an understanding of logic.

Van Til asserts that if one does not want to end with bare possibility, one must assume that the least bit of coherent experience presupposes complete rationality. 49 Hence, the possibility of rational experience presupposes complete rationality. However, while Van Til holds to the existence of complete rationality, he does not mean to imply that the resolution of all logical difficulties is possible. Rather, complete rationality is, for Van Til, that which is infinite, uncreated, underived,
comprehensive, and exhaustive.\textsuperscript{50} It is only manifest in the Triune God of Christian Theism. Because rationality for (finite) man, on the other hand, is derivative, insufficient, non-comprehensive, non-exhaustive, and hence unattainable, he inevitably encounters seeming paradox or contradiction in his knowledge.\textsuperscript{51}

Closely corresponding to this notion of the apparently contradictory is the notion of the limiting concept.\textsuperscript{52} Van Til seems to employ this idea in two ways. In one sense the limiting concept in Van Til's thought is a limited concept. It is limited in that it is finite, and hence non-comprehensive and non-exhaustive. It is limited because it cannot attain the comprehensive rationality found in God. In another sense a limiting concept is limiting concept in that it limits and supplements another concept. Taken together the concepts which limit and supplement each other analogically approximate but do not exhaust the ultimate rationality found in God.

John Frame summarizes Van Til's thinking on this point in his little book \textit{Van Til: The Theologian}. Van Til, he says, constructs his notion of the limiting concept roughly along these lines. 1. Because only God has exhaustive knowledge, we cannot expect to attain to such. 2. This means that we cannot assume that all biblical doctrines can be shown to be fully consistent in terms of our present finite understanding. 3. Therefore one must not use deductive exegesis which would for the sake of logical consistency compromise the clear teaching of Scripture at one point with its teaching at another. 4.
If no explicit logical consistency can be maintained, then we must be satisfied with the apparent paradox. Thus, one teaching (doctrine) of Scripture is to be limited and supplemented by the other. "Apparent contradiction" results then from the "limiting" nature of biblical concepts. But again, these are only apparent because they are, in fact, reconciled in the mind of God. This means that "every statement of the truth is an approximation of the fulness of truth as it exists in God."

The following quote serves to summarize Van Til's understanding of this point.

To be faithful to the system of truth as found in Scripture one must not take one doctrine and deduce from it by means of syllogistic procedure what he thinks follows from it. One must rather gather together all the facts and all the teachings of Scripture and organize them as best he can, always mindful of the fact that such ordering is the ordering of the revelation of God, who is never fully comprehensible to man.

By the notions of the apparently contradictory and the limiting concept Van Til sought to put forward a Christian understanding of mystery. He sought to guard God's sovereignty against an abstract logic (rationalism) to which he must be subject. And, he was equally concerned with avoiding any notion which would make God himself subject to mystery (irrationalism). To accomplish this, he found pure rationality within God. God (and by implication all things in the finite world) is not mysterious or incomprehensible because he is shrouded by irrational mystery, rather he is "mysterious because he is, within himself, wholly rational."
Because I will take up Van Til's notions of the apparently contradictory and limiting concept in the critique I will not comment on this idea at this point except to note that there is a notable difference between Van Til's understanding of paradox and Herman Dooyeweerd's understanding of antinomy. In this respect William Young, in his book *Towards a Reformed Philosophy*, makes the penetrating observation that at this point the relation of Dooyeweerd to Van Til closely resembles the relation of Kant to Hegel. He notes that "Dooyeweerd, like Kant, excludes antinomies by critical restriction of human thought. Van Til, like Hegel, makes of antinomy the ultimate kernel of reason itself. By means of paradox, pure rationality is sought."
B. The Dynamic/Historical Aspect of Common Grace

Van Til seems to have approached the problem of common grace in the same way he approached and critiqued apostate philosophy in general. All apostate thought, he argued, tends to two extremes. There is on the one hand the tendency towards pure rationalism which seeks an abstract unifying principle, an absolute which binds the particulars of reality. This was most consistently expressed by Parmenides. The other tendency is toward contingency in which the brute facts (individuality) are taken to be ultimate. This position is most consistently expressed by Heraclitus. (All is flux.) The dilemma is always one of "pure single thingness without meaning and abstract rationality without content." 58

Superimposed upon the problem of common grace, this critical paradigm suggests that the denial of common grace is similar to the Parmenidean rejection of the relative in the interest of the absolute (the divine decrees). And the view of common grace based upon neutral reason seeks to solve the problem of differentiation by an appeal to an abstract universal in which the unique distinctiveness (the antithesis) is denatured.

So, from Van Til's perspective, while the former was correct in finding the unifying principle in the counsel of God, they did not do justice to the idea of history as the means to which differentiation was to take place. And, the latter compromised the differentiation and the antithesis by giving a
relative priority to a temporal abstract unifying principle, reason. From such a standpoint Van Til could claim that he proposed a "balanced view of common grace" one which would neither go "off to the right by denying a theory of common grace, nor go "off to the left by affirming a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome." 59

In this section we intend to determine whether Van Til was able to maintain the balance that he sought and still do justice to the dynamics of history in his doctrine of common grace.
1. Common Grace as Earlier Grace

Van Til claims that "all common grace is earlier grace. Its commonness lies in its earliness." What he means by this is not very clear. Van Til never gives a precise definition of what he means by the whole idea of "earlier grace."

This has led one critic of Van Til, James Daane, to take the position that this understanding of common grace as earlier grace does not refer to "ordinary chronological time." Daane claims that Van Til's time concept is defined existentially and hence "earlier" is a correlative of non-existence. Thus, he says, "Van Til speaks of an 'earlier stage of history.' This is confusing for what he really means is an earlier stage of existence."

While Daane offers many fine criticisms of Van Til, it seems that he is making too much out of too little in this case. Daane himself admits that the natural reading of the statement that all common grace is earlier grace could simply mean that at an earlier period in history there is more common grace than at a later period in history. Support for this could even be found in Van Til's statement that there is much common grace at the beginning of history. And the belief that common grace as earlier grace means simply more common grace at an earlier time and less at a later time, might also seem to find confirmation in Van Til's statement that common grace is "for the time being." Nevertheless, this does not deter Daane from claiming that Van Til is not referring to "ordinary chronological time."
Besides the reasons that Daane himself gives, there are other reasons to reject his criticism of Van Til on this point. While Van Til may have opened the door for misunderstanding due to his lack of clarity on this matter, his view of common grace as earlier grace viewed in light of (1) his polemic against Hoeksema and Schilder (2) his polemic against a scholastic notion of commonness and (3) his view of the progressive development of the antithesis in history will be sufficient to demonstrate that Van Til is referring to ordinary chronological time.

(1) One way in which Van Til seems to have employed the idea of common grace as earlier grace is simply that it exists now at an earlier time than the final separation of the saved and lost on the day of judgment. Van Til maintains that Schilder and Hoeksema illegitimately use God's attitude toward the elect and reprobate at the final judgment to determine what God's attitude must be now at an earlier time in history. They do this when they argue that grace is only for the elect. Since there is no common grace for the reprobate in hell, any common grace toward the reprobate that could be said to exist now must be earlier grace.

(2) Van Til wants to set over against a scholastic notion which sees commonality in the "lower" dimensions of reality, an understanding of common grace in terms of an historical earlier/later conception. This is based upon his view that there can be no unqualified epistemological commonness even in the "lower" sciences. Thus he says, "All common grace is earlier grace."
It pertains to all dimensions in the same way at all stages of history.\textsuperscript{66} Since the structural/static aspect of Van Til's thought leaves no room for common grace (because man is totally corrupt and against God in all his activity) there is the need to emphasize the historical aspect to maintain that man is not totally corrupt in the same sense as the reprobate who have reached their final destination. And because man is not totally corrupt \textit{in time} in the same sense as he will eventually be in eternal perdition, God is not totally against him now in the same sense that he will be later. There is thus room for an attitude of favor on the part of God.

This does not, however, answer why common grace must be earlier grace \textit{in history}. (Why could it not be later?) It only seems to make sense in light of (3) Van Til's view of the antithesis and its development in history. As noted above, Van Til believes common grace pertains to all dimensions of life, but "ever decreasingly as the time of history goes on."\textsuperscript{67}

Van Til holds that there is a progressive separation between the regenerate and unregenerate, an increasing manifestation of the antithesis (as each comes to fuller epistemological self-consciousness), and the gradual withdrawal of common grace from the reprobate. Hence, "common grace will diminish still more in the course of history."\textsuperscript{68} Moreover,

God increases His attitude of wrath upon the reprobate as time goes on, until at the end time, at the consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state. On
the other hand God increases His attitude of favor upon the elect, until at last, at the consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state. 69

In this sense, Van Til seems to imply that earlier grace is actually original-but-waning-grace.

There are several questions which must be posed at this point. First, one must question whether the ebb and flow of the historical process will actually allow such a steady and progressive unfolding of the antithesis. Is not the historical process and its relation to common grace much more ambiguous than that which Van Til puts forth? Secondly, does this commit Van Til to the position that common grace was greater before the entrance of Christ into the world and before the preaching of the gospel to all the nations? Are we to conceive of the (non-regenerative) effects of the gospel as actually regressive? Finally, one must question whether there has been, is, or will be an increase in epistemological consciousness such that it has been (will be) revealed in an ever increasing antithesis. Can one assume that as the epistemological self-consciousness of the unregenerate increases, they must increasingly adhere to their epistemological premises of brute factuality and abstract logic? Isn't it more likely that one idol simply will be exchanged for another after a false god (whether expressed in an idol of stone and wood, or in an ideology, or in one of the various "isms") has failed them?

Van Til seems to assume that the unregenerate inevitably will follow (in the course of history) his ultimate convictions.
to their logical (consistent) conclusions and then recognize them as radically antithetical to the Christian position. While bringing the unbeliever to epistemological self-consciousness may be a noble task for the Christian apologist, it is questionable whether this has happened in the course of history, or will happen in the future. It probably will not happen because there are a multitude of factors other than logical consistency that make up a person's (or culture's) worldview.

Without commenting further on what appears to be a rather inadequate view of history and the historical process, we must now turn and seek the roots of this inadequacy in Van Til's common grace thought itself. As we do, we will find that the historical process which Van Til seeks to emphasize is preempted by a more dominant factor in Van Til's scheme—his supralapsarian starting point in the divine decrees.
2. Supralapsarianism and Common Grace

There are two principles which regulate Van Til's discussion of common grace. The first is his starting point in the sovereign decrees of God with respect to the elect and reprobate. The second is his understanding of the historical process in terms of the problem of universality and particularity, generality and diversity, and commonality and differentiation. Van Til defines history "as a process of differentiation." 69a

This second idea combined with the first brings Van Til to construe the problem of common grace as follows:

The common grace problem deals with this question: what do entities which will one day be wholly different from one another have in common before (the) final stage of separation is reached. 70

In other words, the "problem" is to find the universal in terms of which the particulars (the elect and reprobate) have their meaning. Or, what do the elect and reprobate have in common, beyond what is obviously metaphysically (ontologically) common?

Here Van Til, as always, maintains that there is an ultimate and a temporal (historical) universal. The principle of unity which is ultimate is the counsel of God, the unity within history is "the common cultural task set before men." 71 Van Til orients the discussion around the commonness of all humanity in the prelapsarian state.

Van Til maintains, of course, that Adam was created with a good nature. However, this "good nature" "cannot be taken otherwise than as a limiting concept." 72 Limited by what? It must only be understood as correlative to the decisive repre-
sentative act that was to come. This "good nature" must "be taken as a limiting concept in relation to the decisive ethical reaction that was to take place in connection with the probationary command." 73

The good ethical reaction which man had with respect to God's revelation before the fall is not the consummated good which man shall attain in glory but it was a good ethical reaction. It was good (and this is Van Til's point) not so much in a lower (or some metaphysically depreciated sense) but in an earlier sense. 74

Taking the "earlier" as the point of departure for the later we can "begin with something the believer's have in common with unbelievers."

(Both believer and unbeliever) exist in Adam as their common representative. They have seen the testimony of God in common. They have given a common good ethical reaction to this testimony, the common mandate of God. They are all mandate-hearers and covenant-keepers. God's attitude to all is the same. 76

If I am not mistaken, it seems as though Van Til is (in a rather strange and oblique manner) arguing for common grace on the basis of the federal headship of Adam before the probationary command. But, he quickly adds that this favorable attitude must be taken as correlative to the representative moral act of Adam, because the "original situation was an historically unfinished situation." 77 And, because this original situation was correlative to the still-to-come representative moral act, the situation would change either one way or the other. "And thus God's attitude would be changed." 73
When man in fact did fall, God's attitude became one of common wrath. Here Van Til agrees with Calvin when he says the human race is "individually bound by the guilt and desert of eternal death, as derived from the person of Adam." But if there is meaning in this it must also be said that there existed an earlier attitude of favor. In fact, the very reality of the existence of common wrath depends upon an earlier attitude of favor.

Van Til seems to suggest that as God's wrath was displayed upon mankind as a result of the disobedient representative moral act of Adam, so also common grace was extended to mankind after the fall because of the common grace shown to him before the fall. Because of this dual attitude with respect to Adam, the ideas of common grace and common wrath must both be kept as constitutive factors in measuring the present situation by the Scriptures.

One must not overlook the framework with which Van Til is working. Since Van Til insists that common grace and common wrath are historical correlatives, and he also speaks of common grace as existing before the fall, one might assume that we must conclude that God's wrath exists as a correlative to common grace before the fall. But, of course, Van Til does not hold that there was a common wrath before sin entered the world. But his framework still requires a correlative something set in (dialectical?) opposition to common grace. This was the still-to-be-decided decisive moral act of Adam.
But, there is a difficulty in that the ethical reaction must result in the production of elect and reprobate persons.

But after the common, in each case comes the conditional. History is a process of differentiation. Accordingly, the idea of that which is common between the elect and reprobate is always a limiting concept. It is commonness for the time being. There lies back of it a divine »as if? 80

This quote reveals what we briefly mentioned earlier as Van Til's understanding of history as a process of differentiation of the elect and reprobate. It must be observed that this is a supralapsarianistic reading of pre-fall history. This period is understood and defined in terms of post-fall history. 81

This is corroborated when he says:

At the very first stage of history there is much common grace. There is a common good nature under the common favor of God. It cannot remain what it is. It is conditional. Differentiation must set in and does set in. (emphasis mine) 82

How then are we to understand this phrase "must set in?" If Adam did not disobey, would history still be a process of differentiation? If history is defined as differentiation, and this is understood as the separation of the elect and reprobate, then it is hard to see how an unfallen world could have a "history." It would appear that (a) the definition of history as differentiation must surrendered, or (b) the belief that "differentiation must set in" must be given up. In either case, Van Til's structuring of the problem would require significant revision. One cannot have it both ways.

The only way that Van Til can have it both ways is by denying the possibility that Adam could have obeyed. We have
already noted that Van Til seems to give the impression, at least on one occasion, that Adam could have responded obediently in the probationary situation. He said that "whether Adam was to obey or to disobey, the situation would be changed." But if this is true the change that would have followed would have had nothing to do with a differentiation into elect and reprobate persons.

The only way to explain this is to point out that Van Til does not truly hold to a real possibility of obedience at the time of the fall. In fact he explicitly states that:

The fully Biblical and therefore fully Reformed, position is not reached till God in His sovereign decree is made the ultimate cause of all that comes to pass in this world through the deeds of men, whether these deeds lead to their final destruction or by God's grace to their final glory. Hence, too, we dare not say that Adam could, in the last analysis, have chosen to be obedient just as well as disobedient.

This statement can only be taken as a denial of the generally held Reformed-Augustinian notion that Adam was created posse peccare and posse non peccare. One wonders how this could be conceived as the fully Reformed, let alone fully Biblical position.

We do not intend to dwell on the implications of this position in general (such as whether it makes God the author of sin--I believe it does) but rather our focus will be on how this affects the doctrine of common grace.

The most obvious defect is Van Til's understanding of history as differentiation. This notion is too simplistic. While
the differentiation of the elect and reprobate may indeed be said to take place in history, we must assert that history is not merely differentiation nor differentiation so conceived. It thus ought not be defined solely in such terms. Of course Van Til does hold that this process is always accompanied and opposed by the commonality of common grace. Yet, one must ask if the commonality is not too easily overshadowed by the divine "as if." God's real ad extra dealings with his creatures appear to be overshadowed by Van Til's attempt to honor His ad intra relations (i.e. secret will vs. revealed will).

The most crucial question which must be faced and answered is: As if what? The answer seems to be that God deals with man as if something were true which is in fact not true. He deals with the reprobate as if they could be saved through his common grace and deals with the elect as if they could be lost through his common wrath.

Van Til senses that an ethical objection will be raised. If God's treatment of man is conditioned by what man is not, would not such a treatment violate the character of God? Or, can the well meant offer of the Gospel be meaningful if it is based upon and qualified by an "as if."

Van Til responds by appealing to Calvin's response to Pijlus who made a similar charge. One syllogism based upon non-Christian assumptions would indicate that this is a dishonest divine method. Calvin, according to Van Til, would answer such an objection by quoting Paul, "Who art thou, O man?".
Here Van Til fuses his notion of the incomprehensibility of God with Calvin's distinction between ultimate and proximate cause. The Christian must hold that though he cannot intellectually penetrate the question exhaustively, we must hold that there is genuine harmony here. That is why, claims Van Til, "we need the idea of two wills, that of command and that of secret counsel." Christians know that there is no conflict between these two wills.

They know this not because they have been able to penetrate intellectually the relationship between the two. They know it by faith, and they know it intellectually so far as to see that, unless we may hold that harmony rests in God, all human experience is a farce.

(Here we observe again what we noted above, i.e. Van Til holds that any coherent experience presupposes the existence of a rationally coherent system of thought. Hence, "human experience is a farce" if the problem is not harmonized in the mind of God.)

This notion of the as-if character of God's relationship comes into fuller relief in the manner in which Van Til defines the general offer of the gospel. Here he finds a parallel between the general offer and the situation as it existed before the fall. As God's general revelation plus the probationary command invited all men to eternal life, yet they were rendered inexcusable by their rejection of it, so now again while it is still certain as ever in the mind of God that they shall be eventually lost, they are rendered the more inexcusable by the general Gospel invitation, and have added to their con-
demnation by their second rejection of God. 90

And, as the initial offer to mankind came to mankind in general as yet undifferentiated as represented in Adam as federal head, so too now the general presentation comes to an undifferentiated generality. After the fall mankind which was initially placed in a way of life, was then placed in a way of death. Meanwhile, Christ's redemptive work comes into the picture. But, because of his supralapsarian position with respect to limited (particular?) atonement, Van Til cannot say that the gospel offer comes to particular elect or reprobate persons. Rather,

The offer comes to those who have so far neither believed nor disbelieved. It comes before that differentiation has taken place. It comes thus generally, so that differentiation may have meaning. 91

One must not miss the place the universal offer of the Gospel plays within the overall framework of Van Til's system at this point. The general (universal) offer provides the necessary, correlative universal through which the particular (in this case the elect and reprobate) has meaning. Moreover, the general offer of the gospel is related analogically to the proximate will (the will of command) of God in a similar way that the differentiated individual elect or reprobate persons are related to the ultimate (secret counsel) of God. The following diagram can serve to demonstrate the framework with which Van Til is operating.
It is only against the background of the counsel of God Van Til claims, that it is possible to give genuine meaning to the general without doing injustice to the particular. In fact, he says that "the general is a means toward the realization of the particular." The very possibility of differentiation into the elect and reprobate presupposes as its concomitant a correlative generality. By this construction Van Til seems to seek to avoid having to say that the gospel call comes only to the elect. This would in Van Til's terms be a contradiction in terms—the general (offer of the gospel) would really be a particular offer (to the elect).

However, we must ask just how meaningful this general offer really is. No doubt within Van Til's own framework in regard to the correlativeity of the universal and particular it is meaningful. But within his very framework there seems to be
a bit of confusion. For when he speaks of the general offer of the gospel as evidence of common grace he insists that it only comes to mankind in general and not to elect and reprobate individuals in particular. But, when he speaks of common grace as being such as rain-and-sunshine, he speaks of it as coming to believers in particular "as mercies from a Father's hand" and to the unbeliever so "that he might crucify to himself the Son of God afresh." In other words, the good blessings of God given to the unbeliever become converted into an expression of wrath.

Thus, Van Til does not say about the common grace expressed in the general offer the same thing as he says about common grace expressed in rain-and-sunshine. The reason seems to be that if he did it would impinge upon the ethical character of God's act and his Word as offered in the Gospel call. The general offer of the gospel, even for Van Til, cannot be said to be an expression of wrath. (It could not be so any more than pre-lapsarian general revelation could be said to be so.) Yet, the other types of common grace are clearly said to be such an expression of common wrath.

This inner contradiction seems to signal a need to seriously question the philosophical framework within which the ethical character of the gospel offer is defended. Granting Van Til's genuine desire to be concrete, one must ask whether his notion of the general offer as coming to an undifferentiated mankind in general is not itself an exercise in abstraction. Isn't the gospel call, so conceived, an abstract (temporal) universal?
It seems as though the general offer holds the status of being a metaphysical strategem to provide the necessary universal to the already posited particulars (the elect and reprobate individuals) of human experience.

We must conclude that Van Til's desire to be more historical and dynamic is compromised by the static categories of universality and particularity under which the historical process is subsumed. More specifically, it is a supralapsarian pre-emption of the dynamics of the historical process. One wonders if Van Til actually offers a view of common grace that does more justice to history than did Schilder and Hoeksema.

Schilder, according to Van Til, wrongly took the position that the gifts of which Paul speaks in Acts 14: 16, 17 were given in judgment and therefore do not reveal a favorable attitude of God. Van Til disagrees with Schilder and asserts that these gifts are an expression of God's favor as well as his wrath.

"To be a witness of God, of the whole God, these gifts must show His mercy as well as His wrath." Here Van Til posits the principle that every gift of God must express wrath as well as mercy. Grace and wrath are historically correlative concepts.

Despite this disagreement, Van Til defines history and post-lapsarian time much the way Schilder does. Schilder explains the continuance of history after the fall in terms of the "cultural mandate." The continuance of sinful history is not grounded in the (common) grace of God, but in the divine determination that man must fulfill his cultural function.
History is not qualified by grace, but rather must be accounted for in terms of all of God's attitudes and virtues. God's mercy as well as his justice must be considered which means that history is defined and interpreted as much in terms of wrath as grace. 95

Van Til believes that Schilder made a contribution to the common grace discussion by insisting that common grace must be understood in connection with a common wrath. 96 Grace and wrath for Van Til, like Schilder, are equally ultimate principles in the definition and interpretation of history. Time for Van Til serves as a neutral medium through which differentiation takes place. This neutral time concept for Van Til stems from his departure in the equal ultimacy of the divine decrees in the mind of God, which in turn denatures the historical process itself. Although he emphasizes that time and the historical are the essence of the common grace problem, his abstract point of departure in the timeless, pre-historical decrees of God almost guarantee that created time and history will itself become abstract in his schema.

Against Van Til (and Schilder) it must be maintained that grace and wrath ought not be regarded as equally ultimate principles in a Christian interpretation of history. While God's wrath and grace should not be defined exclusive of each other, neither should they, as Daane says, be defined as "equal, balanced correlates, equally descriptive of our time and history." 97 Rather, the continuance of post-fall history must be qualified
and defined in direct reference to God's common grace with the distinctive purpose of redemption. This position will be defended in the final chapter.
C. Common Grace and the Christian's Attitude Toward the Unbeliever

Van Til's understanding of the Christian's attitude toward the unbeliever is determined by two factors. The first is the degree of epistemological self-consciousness, and the other is the imitation of God's as-if attitude.

In respect to this first factor, Van Til relates the "low" degree of epistemological self-consciousness to its earliness in relation to the eschaton. The reason the sinner does not come to full epistemological self-consciousness is because of the continuing revelational presence within the consciousness of man. Since man was created in knowledge, righteousness and true holiness, and because the "original, true, epistemological reaction in paradise is in turn revelational and therefore further requisite for the sinner," and because "sin has not been able to efface all this requisitional material from the consciousness of man," Van Til concludes that "the very activity of his consciousness is a daily reminder to him of the will of God." Try as he might to fully suppress the voice of God, he cannot do so. "His evil nature would fain subdue the voice of the creation nature, but it cannot do so." 98

This original "creation nature", according to Van Til keeps the unbeliever from becoming fully epistemologically self-conscious. But, this tension is maintained in the unbeliever only so long as the "man of sin" or "the son of perdition" (I Thes. 2:3,4) is restrained.
Till such time as the "son of perdition" has not in that connection sent a strong spirit of delusion, mankind in general is not fully self-conscious of its inherent opposition to God. The pressure of God's revelation upon men is so great that they are, from their own point of view, in a sort of stupor. 99

What then should our attitude be toward those unbelievers who are not epistemologically self-conscious? Van Til points out that there is a tension in this regard. On the one hand Reformed Christians must do all they can do to bring all unbelievers to epistemological self-consciousness, "to make men see that so-called neutral weighing and measuring is a terrible sin in the sight of God." By building our own educational institutions and otherwise, we are to point out that "to ignore God anywhere is to insult the God who has told us that, whether we eat or drink or do anything else, we are to do all to his glory." 100

And yet, in doing this, it must be recognized that when the reprobate are epistemologically self-conscious "the crack of doom has come," for then the fully self-conscious reprobate "will do all he can in every dimension (of life) to destroy the people of God." Hence the tension:

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. 101

Only to the extent that we are at an earlier rather than later stage of history do we receive any measure of tolerance on the part of the unbelieving world, and any influence Christians may exert in society or state presupposes this earlier undif-
ferentiated stage of development.

Secondly, the attitude of Christians toward unbelievers should be one of positive imitation of God's attitude. Thus, in his exegesis of Matthew 5: 44-45 (But I say unto you, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good.), he points out that not only is the believer to deny himself the selfish joy of expressing hostility to the unbeliever, but he is also to replace the attitude of hatred with an attitude of love.

And, he points out, the reason given is not simply because the unbeliever may one day become a Christian. The expressed reason given, and hence the one guide for the believer's action with respect to the enemy is God's attitude with respect to that enemy. Thus,

God's attitude toward that enemy must therefore in some sense be one of love. It is no doubt the love of an enemy, and, therefore, in God's case, never the same sort of love as the love towards his children. And to the extent that we know men to be enemies of the Lord, we too cannot love them in the same sense we are told to love fellow-believers. 102

This is what Van Til means to imply when he states that "we are to make practical use of the concept 'mankind in general'." 103 This notion is to be taken as a limiting concept without forgetting that no such thing exists in any pure state.

We are to think of non-believers as members of the mass of humankind in which the process of differentiation has not yet been completed. It is not to the righteous and to the unrighteous as fully differentiated that God gives
It is thus not on the basis of some single territory of commonality (higher or lower) that the Christian is to cooperate with the unbelieving scientist or philosopher, but rather only on the basis of the fact that they are at an "earlier" undifferentiated stage of history. By this means, Van Til seeks to maintain the ethical and epistemological antithesis while allowing for a qualified historical commonality.

Thus, the structural/static aspect (the degree of epistemological self-consciousness) and the historical (the-not-yet-extinct-common-grace) merge to inform the Christian concerning his attitude toward non-believers.
The obvious rational implications of the idea of "thought content" will be taken up more extensively in the critique below. We may mention at this time however, that Van Til stressed this notion of "thought content" for two reasons: (1) To avoid an abstract God concept, or a mere formal notion of God and (2) To avoid the complete ontological inability of man to receive the revelation of God as was done by Barth and the dialectical theologians. In this regard he says, "the mind of man is made in the image of God and is, as such, a fit instrument for the conveyance of truth of God to man. This mind of man, once it has become sinful needs the cleansing of regeneration in order to become the medium of God's self-expression, but it is not inherently unfit to be such a medium as Barth claims it is." IST. p. 219.

This view has been consistently held by Reformed theologians such as John Gerstner and R.C. Sproul and is reflected in their recent book, Classical Apologetics. It is most clearly reflected in their clear-cut distinction between the "thinking" head (ratiocination) and the "willing" heart (the ethical).
Ibid. p. 81.


Ibid. Cited from *Evidences* p. 11.


Ibid. p. 228.

Ibid. Actually, Van Til has assumed a stance on the nature of truth quite similar to Herman Dooyeweerd. Van Til is saying the same thing as Dooyeweerd when the latter states that: "Even the judgment: 2X2=4 becomes an untruth, if the law-conformable state of affairs, expressed in it, is detached from the temporal world order and from the sovereignty of God as the Creator. It becomes an untruth, if it is absolutionized into a 'truth in itself' (Wahrheit an sich). Creaturely reality itself has a perspective horizon which mocks at any absolutizing of the temporal structure. A superficial (essentially apostate) resting in a temporal horizon of experience that is supposed to be firm in itself, is contrary to truth, contrary to the structure of our selfhood."

See Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* Vol. II (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969 ed.) p. 572. See also Hendrik Hart's perspective on this view of truth in his (unpublished) paper "Transcendental Method & Logic or the Nature of a Fact" where he states that "isolated facts are never true, but just there. They are at most potentially true." (p. 15). Both of these thinkers have worked out in detail what is only a seminal insight by Van Til.

CG. pp. 69-70.

CG. p. 70.

Ibid. p. 85.

Ibid. p. 151.

34 As cited in Rushdoony, op. cit. p. 194.

35 IST. p. 27.

36 IST. p. 27.

38 CG. p. 94.


40 CG. p. 165

41 Ibid. See also DF. (1955) p. 399 ff.

42 DF. (1967), p. 44

43 DF. (1967), p. 44

45 Ibid.

46 CG. p. 9

47 DF. (1967) p. 45


50 Van Til claims to have substantially differed from the idealists because in allowing "a temporal plurality as basic as unity, and a plurality of interpreters of Reality," they made what they were looking for, that is, the Absolute, obsolescent. They did not account for the Creator/creature distinction. See Van Til's Christianity and Idealism (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955) p. 34, and also Vander Stelt P&S pp. 229 ff.


52 CG. pp. 11, 200, IST. p. 169, CTK. p. 38. John Frame observes that the term "limiting concept" comes from the philosophy of Kant. He notes that for Kant, "a limiting concept has no positive content. Thus, for him the term 'God' may only be used in describing the limitedness of our experience. To say that 'God exists' for Kant, means that our experience is limited as if by God. Van Til, however, uses the term differently. In his thought, limiting concepts do have positive significance. God really does exist, though our concept of God is a 'limiting concept'.

To say that the concept of God is a 'limiting concept' in Van Til's thought is merely to say that our knowledge of God is, though true, non-exhaustive." See Frame's *Van Til: The Theologian* (Chattanooga: Pilgrim Publishing, 1976), p. 34.


54 CG. pp. 112-113.

55 CTK. p. 38.

56 IST. p. 230

57 Young, *op. cit.* p. 134.


59 CG. p. 147.

60 CG. p. 82.

61 Daane, *op cit.* p. 113


64 CG. 74 and Daane *Ibid.*

65 Daane *Ibid.* p. 113

66 CG. p. 82.

67 CG. p. 82.

68 CG. p. 83.

69 CG. p. 83-84.

69a CG. p. 74. Van Til's understanding of "differentiation" is not to be understood in the same sense as Dooyeweerd's notion of historical differentiation as human "form-giving". Rather, it is differentiation of the elect and reprobate.

70 CG. p. 68

71 CG. p. 121.

72 CG. p. 71.

Van Til seems to be implying that any statement concerning "goodness" has a correlate in time even before the fall. Only in the eschaton will such human goodness not be correlative to anything else.

As cited from Calvin's *A Treatise on Eternal Predestination* in CG. p. 74.


See above page
96CG. p. 24.
97Daane p. 143.
99CG. p. 89
100CG. p. 85
101CG. p. 85
102CG. p. 242.
103CG. p. 84.
104CG. p. 84.
LIII. Retrospect and Prospect

One of Van Til's most important contributions to Reformed thought is his criticism of the scholastic dualism which tends to split reality into two distinct epistemological and structural realms. His stress on the unity of revelation, of the covenantal relationship with which man stands before God in all aspects of his life, on the noetic affects of sin and (with the help of neo-idealist epistemology) on the need to place individual givens within the context of the whole, enabled him to break free from much of the nature/grace thinking present in Reformed orthodoxy. As much as any Reformed theologian in North America Van Til stressed that all areas of life and all disciplines within the academy were to be lived in covenantal obedience to the will of God. As Vander Stelt rightly notes, what was especially repugnant to him was the Kantian understanding of religion and science according to which (in Van Til's words) "the field of science is left to the unbeliever and the field of faith is empty of content."\(^1\)

This is the primary motive behind his attack upon any autonomous notion of reason. He correctly saw that as long as such a notion was maintained within Reformed theology it could only do so to the extent it was willing to compromise with Roman Catholic Natural Theology. It was for this same reason that he radically rejected the traditional proofs for the existence of God, and was
critical of any concession to a notion of divinity überhaupt. He took a radical stand against such a notion arguing that this is an empty concept to be shunned by those who have been redeemed by the one true God.

For this reason, no point of contact should be sought in any epistemologically formal agreement between believer and unbeliever. He was quite correct in relating the sense of deity to a "deeper level" within the consciousness of man prior to the ethical/epistemological reaction to revelation, and as seeing it as the true point of contact with the unbeliever. As far as the psychological/epistemological or metaphysical/ethical distinction was brought forth to emphasize this point, it is a welcome emphasis. To seek a point of contact in so-called "common notions" is to ignore the fact that men have in and by them "changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made to corruptible man."

In short, it was his stress on the antithesis and refusal to compromise with any theory founded on unbelief that is the attractive feature of Van Til's thought. This resolute testimony is, as N. Stoker said in praise of Van Til, "wholesome in our times of leveling fundamental differences and of tendencies to compromise."
A. Retrospect--Intellectualism and Common Grace

Our appreciation of the fundamental insights and contributions of Van Til however, cannot come without serious questioning into some key areas of his thought where we believe Van Til's theology has some significant problems. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Van Til's theology is set within a certain intellectualistic cast. Vander Stelt has correctly observed that despite his criticism of Old Princeton rationalism, Van Til continued to think of God and his revelation as noetically objective, as something rational in essence and knowability. And, as William Young has said, he is "still a lover of the logos." One of our concerns in this section is to seek to indicate the roots of this intellectualism and determine its effect on his doctrine of common grace.
1. The Roots of Intellectualism--A Faulty Theory of Epistemological Limits

Any criticism of Van Til in regard to the intellectualistic tendency in his thought must recognize that Van Til himself saw the danger and sought to avoid it. He particularly sought to combat such intellectualism by stressing the unified, comprehensive, and exhaustive character of general revelation. He argued against those theologians who tended to think of revelation as first of all distinct from creation. It is a mistake, argued Van Til, to keep the two concepts of creation and revelation apart, and to say that in addition to creating the world for man, God also revealed himself to man.5

Moreover, he argued that to avoid a "dangerous intellectualism" the sharp distinction between natural and revealed theology must be avoided. This sharp distinction often made by Reformed as well as Arminian and Roman Catholic theologians stems from a conviction that it is possible to establish the truths of natural theology by sheer force of argument, even if it requires faith to accept the truths of revealed theology. Against this perspective Van Til argues that the whole of creation is revelatory of God and that "it is not the impartation of intellectual truths alone that we meet in the Christian revelation." He warns that there is a constant danger lurking in this respect, for we all too easily tend to think of Christianity as a series of intellectual propositions only. But, it should not be forgotten that "redemption comes to the whole of the human personality." The revelation of God "comes to the whole consciousness"
of man."⁶ No function of man (his will, intellect, or his emotions) should have an ontological primacy. There is "no aspect of human personality that has any higher metaphysical standing than any other."⁷

All this is, we believe, a healthy emphasis. However, a closer look at what Van Til means by a "dangerous intellectualism" is required. For it is not primarily a somewhat undue emphasis on the intellect to the detriment of the emotional or volitional life of the human personality. This, he claims, "is not a serious matter," but depends "to a large extent on temperament." What is meant, "is the setting up of the intellect as something independent of God."⁸

This is true enough. However, it should be observed that the "dangerous intellectualism" which Van Til wants to avoid is described negatively in terms of what is to be avoided anthropologically. The ontological (or metaphysical) boundaries or limits of theoretical concept formation are not his main concern.

Basic to Van Til's position is his appeal to the thought and being of God for the solving of various philosophical (epistemological and ontological) difficulties. I believe that this appeal reflects a tendency towards theo-ontologism—a belief that human knowledge is made possible only by way of a direct, though not necessarily explicit (suppressed?), vision of the divine essence itself. Thus, for example, the problem of universality/particularity is solved by a direct appeal to the unity/diversity in the ontological trinity. And, any epistemolog-
ical difficulty that cannot be logically resolved is "solved" by an appeal to the divine archtypal intellect in which there is no real contradiction. It is only through a knowledge of the divine essence that one can know anything at all.

An unfortunate corollary to this approach is that it results in a way of speaking about God that exceeds the confines of Biblical revelation. Thus we find Van Til referring to God as the "concrete universal" and "absolute rational being," the one in whom "the real is the rational and the rational is real," in whom "being and consciousness are coterminous," and one whose thought is "analytic." To be sure, Van Til adopted this language, particularly from idealism, in order to fill it with Christian meaning, and thereby establish a point of contact for meaningful dialogue. Full cognizance is taken of this fact.

Nevertheless, it is our opinion that such a way of speaking of God is highly inappropriate and should not be countenanced even for apologetical purposes. The whole problem stems from the inappropriate attempt to exceed the legitimate bounds of theoretical thought by means of a metaphysical strategem that seeks to solve any given theoretical (philosophical) problem by a direct appeal to the deity. When this approach is followed no limits can be placed on the way we speak of God, any sort of language would be legitimate as long as it serves its apologetical purpose. For those who worship the one True God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, redeemer of the world through Jesus Christ, this is hardly an option and must be seriously questioned.
Such a speculative theo-ontological perspective is not simply an inadvertent sidelight to Van Til's system (if it were we would mitigate our criticism to a great extent), but this theological metaphysics is necessarily involved and consistent with the notion that our knowledge of God and the universe is basically and essentially of a rational character. Final appeal must always be made where pure rationality is found—in the divine essence. Antinomies only exist because of the necessary incompleteness of our rational-theoretical knowledge of God and the created universe. This rational tendency of necessity implies what Dooyeweerd calls, "a relapse into a metaphysical theory of the intrinsical divine being and its attributes, which Calvin called a 'vacua et metorica speculatio'."\textsuperscript{14}

Another unfortunate corollary of such speculative thought is the tendency of Van Til to by-pass a thoroughgoing analysis of creaturely reality. I call this Van Til's tendency toward "hasty confessionalizing". In the next section I will explain how this has an adverse effect on his doctrine of common grace.
2. The Results of Intellectualism--The Tendency Towards "Hasty Confessionalizing"

Among the criticisms made of Van Til, there is one feature in particular which stands out. In varying degrees this has been pointed out by Knudsen, Stoker, Vander Stelt, Frame, DeBoer and Daane. Knudsen refers to it as the tendency to keep the discussion of a thing on the concrete (plastic) horizon of experience. Vander Stelt notes that Van Til tends to by-pass matters dealing with an analysis of the creational dimension of reality as such. Similarly, Stoker suggests that while Van Til as an apologist rightly stresses the ultimate meaning moment of reality he may have fallen into the opposite error of not giving the specific or analytical meaning moments their full due. Even John Frame who is generally highly positive in his evaluation of Van Til, recognizes the "elliptical highly summarized arguments" he employed. To this we add our own concern that while Van Til seems to allow for non-Christian contributions to culture and science and allows for a qualified Christian cooperation in their efforts, he never gives any substantial guidance as to how this would be done and to what extent.

It is not insignificant that Van Til, a self-proclaimed follower of Abraham Kuyper (and for many years the foremost Kuyperian in North America) would fail to wrestle with the how of common grace and fail to give further insight to the relation of common grace and redemptive grace, or to relate common grace and cultural activity. S.J. Zuidema notes that Kuyper's intention was to show how particular grace and common grace cohere and co-operate, how they influence each other, and what the true
nature of the relationship is. Kuyper's basic questions are:
(1) How is it possible that common grace can be of significance for particular grace? (2) How is it possible that particular grace can be of significance for common grace? and (3) Of what significance can they be for each other? 19

Whatever one may think of Kuyper's answers, it can at least be said that he pointedly addressed these questions. But for Van Til, the very questions recede into the background of his supralapsarian/theologistic posing-of-the-problem. 20

One is tempted to attribute his lack of patience for detail and his penchant for getting to the ultimate point of concern very quickly in any discussion to the fact that Van Til was first and foremost a theological apologist and therefore did of necessity stress ultimate concerns. To a great extent this is true, and a failure to appreciate this fact will lead to a distortion of Van Til's intention and a fundamental misunderstanding of his whole perspective. Nevertheless, there is, I am convinced, also a more substantive reason for this problem in Van Til's thought.

In seeking to limit the autonomy of theoretical thought, Van Til understood the divine being as having a critical function. The boundary between God and man is understood as one of a critical limitation. This means that one cannot suppose that he can attain to the unity in the divine being and knowledge. In fact, this unity is not even to be taken as an ideal to be striven for. Thus, the boundary between God and man (the Creator-creature dis-
tinction) is defined in terms of not bringing to unity elements of experience. By placing the ultimate meaning and function of theoretical activity in God (as expressed in the divine archtypal intellect), Van Til tends to place finite theoretical apprehension in the background in favor of the ultimate theoretical apprehension in God. The result is that unity is not sought, but simply confessed. 21

Thus, when antinomy or paradox is confronted in our theorizing its solution is simply found by an appeal to the divine archtypal intellect. Repeatedly, Van Til insists that in God there is the metaphysical unity of elements; of unity and diversity, subject and object (i.e. God's knowledge as analytic), and of thought and being, which must be kept discrete on the creaturely level. 22 This means that any problem of epistemology has its solution because subject and object are united in the divine mind. And, the ontological problem of the universal and particular is solved because of the equal ultimacy of the one and the many in the ontological trinity.

One central problem with this notion is that it tends to "screen out" certain alternative approaches to the (perceived) problems as they have been formed by apostate thought in the first place. By taking such an approach one tends to lock oneself into a certain understanding, which forbids the seeking of other interpretations, lest one absolutize his own thought. There is the tendency to accept too readily the setting-of-the-problem or the posing-of-the-question. The way to a critical insight
into false motives at the very source of the theoretical enterprise
is obstructed because a super-natural appeal to a solution in the
divine intellect is always at hand, ready to be employed to end
any theoretical discussion or controversy. It then becomes quite
easy to hide behind an epistemological humility when, in fact, it
is very possible that an accommodation has always been made to an
unbiblical position. If such is the case, any answer given in
response to the problem (whether by an appeal to the divine being
or not) would be a wrong answer simply because it was a wrongly
formulated (false) question.²⁴

Thus, while it may be said that Van Til's critique of apostate
thought and any synthesis thereof (including the natural
theology of Rome) is radical in that he (negatively) opposes any
theoretical construct which is not founded upon the triune God
of the Bible, it cannot be said to be Biblically radical in the
sense that he is (positively) critical of those constructs as
formulated. Perhaps that is why one cannot help but get the
distinct impression that Van Til is often more correct in what
he opposes than what he proposes.

It is undoubtable that Van Til wanted to put forward a view
of common grace which would allow Christian activity in the
arts, sciences, politics etc. In this he is truly Kuyperian.
He, like Kuyper, would have nothing to do with the Anabaptist
assumption that the born-again soul and the temporal-visible
world are mutually exclusive opposites. However, one must ask
whether he is able, given the way he posed and defended the
doctrine of common grace, to encourage such action in an intergal
way.
Zuidema notes that what Kuyper intended with his doctrine of common grace was not simply to pave the way for some sort of neutral appreciation of the cultural activity of unbelievers but rather "he wanted to blaze a trail for God's believing people to engage in their own distinctive way in the 'domain of common grace'--an activity having its origin in and deriving its impulse from particular grace. Kuyper showed a way to be active pro Rege in the domain of common grace."\(^{25}\) We must conclude that this is a feature which is noticeably absent in Van Til's teaching on common grace.

While Van Til holds that common grace checks the operation of sin and the curse on sin, he fails to appreciate, as did Kuyper, that it also in principle makes possible again the unfolding of creation's potentialities and the development of the creature. As Zuidema notes, "next to the stemming of sin and curse, common grace in Kuyper's view also operates for 'progress': it serves and promotes cultural development and progress, and makes these possible."\(^{26}\) Against this relative "cultural optimism" of Kuyper\(^{27}\) we find the radical cultural pessimism of Van Til. The Christian's "witness" in the scientific/cultural endeavor inevitably produces a greater amount of epistemological consciousness on the part of the unbeliever, the result being an even greater separation between elect and reprobate, and another step toward the eschaton. The result is an increasing withdrawal of the Christian from integral cultural activity, which stems not from an anabaptist dichotomy between the believer and the temporal-visible world as such, but rather from the radical antithesis as posited...
(over-simplistically) between the believer and the unbeliever.

Hence, Van Til's theology in general, and his view of common grace in particular, is most salutary as a corrective. It is quite difficult however, to try to build a thetical philosophical or theological edifice upon the basis of what he furnished. This is particularly true of his doctrine of common grace. For example, although we found that Van Til wants to relate the doctrine of common grace to a philosophy of history, we never really get such a philosophy but rather a superimposed metaphysical scheme relating universals and particulars. And, although Van Til wants to allow Christian cooperation with unbelievers up to a point, we are never given a perspective on how this is to be done. And, the reason why it is to be done (to create a greater degree of epistemological self-consciousness on the part of the unbeliever) is incomplete and unsatisfactory. Also, one would expect that in a discussion of common grace there would be consideration given on how it relates to the development of culture and cultural life. And yet none is to be found. The by-passing of these areas is not a mere oversight, nor can it be simply dismissed as beyond Van Til's concern as an apologist. It is, we believe, an inescapable consequence of his speculative theo-ontologizing and his faulty theory of epistemological limits.
B. Prospect

1. Postlapsarian History as Common Grace History

In order to understand the preservation of the world order after the Fall as an act of God's grace, it must be understood that God had placed man in a covenantal either/or situation. Adam and his seed would receive either eternal glory through obedient confirmation of the covenant of creation (sacramentally represented in the Tree of Life) or eternal perdition and curse by denial of the covenant. The Fall, therefore, might have been followed at once by a consummation of the curse which was stipulated in the covenant ("You shall surely die."). This final judicial pronouncement did not occur, however, and the eschatological consummation of God's wrath was delayed.

Yet, it was not the Fall itself that delayed the consummation. Even if man had obeyed he would have been called upon to fulfill the cultural (creation) mandate. Rather, the delay was due, as Meredith G. Kline puts it, "to the principle and purpose of divine compassion by which a new way of arriving at the consummation was introduced, the way of redemptive covenant with common grace as its historical corollary."²⁸

The point which needs to be stressed is that God was under no (covenantal) obligation to delay the final consummation of his wrath. According to the principle of justice expressed in the Covenant of Creation the rebellious covenant-breaker might have been consigned then and there to eternal perdition, the place of God's eternal wrath, along with the Temptor. It was only by
God the Father's sovereign grace in Covenant with the Son that it was decreed that a new people would be redeemed out of fallen mankind. To make room for this people and the history of redemption, the execution of final judgment against men and demons would be postponed. God's judicial pronouncement did not assume the form of a final ultimate judgment, but rather a common temporal curse against all of mankind (Gen.3:16-19).

Man was not totally abandoned to the power of sin and Satan, nor would he be cast into outer darkness. The positive benefit that man was to attain by this restraint on sin are not the eternal (eschatological) blessings which believers will receive through God's saving grace in Christ, but they are blessings that all men experience in common by virtue of the continuing world order. These blessings are not deserved by mankind, but benefits enjoyed by the grace of the Creator in his forbearance with those who have forfeited all blessing by their rebellion against him.  

Hence, we may say in a sense that God's grace and wrath may not be defined apart from each other. We may even say with Kline that the "limitations of the common curse, which distinguish it from the postponed ultimate, unmitigated curse, are those imposed by the simultaneously operating principle of common grace." We may even say, in this sense, that common grace and common wrath are correlative. Yet, they are not to be regarded as equally ultimate principles in the interpretation of history. God's common grace (expressed both negatively
in the restraint of sin and positively in the preservation and continuation of certain elements of the social-cultural order, even (in a modified fashion) exists for the sake of his work of redemption. The same cannot be said of his common curse. History then should distinctively and decisively be qualified by grace. 

All this implies that man would not have sunk into "nothingness" if God had not dealt "graciously." To be sure, the grounds for the possibility of the prolongation of human activity must be sought in divine longsuffering, which does not lead to salvation and redemptive grace. But it should not be argued from this act of God's mercy that man would have slipped into non-being. Rather, it simply means that God has withheld the full force of his wrath for the time being in order that the history of redemption may run its course. The mere existence of our temporal, historically unfolding, creation results from the (common) grace of God. In a sense then, common grace is long-suffering grace.
2. *Culture Formation and the Unbeliever*

We have noted that Van Til saw the need to emphasize the historical dimension in regard to the doctrine of common grace. However, Van Til never explained how common grace comes to expression in history. Therefore, he did not escape the tendency in Reformed dogmatics to use the doctrine of common grace as a means to cover a multitude of theoretical sins. It is, of course, true that common grace keeps man from being as bad and depraved as he could be. And it is true that the unregenerate man is not fully consistent with his ultimately held beliefs (presuppositions). Yet, the mere statement of these rather obvious facts does not get at the dynamics involved in regard to the unbeliever's contributions to culture.

For this reason Reformed dogmatics must come to grips with a theory of culture which will be able to faithfully maintain the doctrine of total corruption, the emphasis on the spiritual antithesis (in Kuyper's line), and thus radically reject any notion of a so-called natural light of reason which remains unaffected by the fall (an emphasis on the noetic affects of sin).

On this matter, Reformed dogmatics would do well to seek to develop the philosophical insights of Herman Dooyeweerd in his understanding of apostate contributions to culture. Dooyeweerd maintains that every cultural movement, however inimical to God in its apostacy, must be properly acknowledged for its historical merits to the extent that it has contributed to
cultural disclosure. By "disclosure" he refers to that activity by which man as lord of creation opens up and develops the wealth of creational structures. But while it must be recognized that God uses apostate powers to further unfold the potentials of the creation, it must be understood that when an apostate faith leads the opening up of culture there will be an inevitable disharmony (we may say "curse") in cultural life. Assumed in this approach is that historical development or the process-of becoming is not an independent or autonomous process which stands over against God's creation. There is a norm for cultural unfolding.

The history of apostate thought has shown, according to Dooyeweerd, that when a great discovery has been made, or a potential formerly unknown has been revealed, that particular aspect is seen as the key to understanding reality as a whole. Having rejected Christ as the only true archemedian point, man must (because as a religious creature he must be rooted in something) inevitably turn to some aspect of created reality as the fundamental point of coherence of creation. This particular aspect is then lifted out of its God given place in the creation order and is thus given excessive (unnormative) power as a cultural force. However, this excessive expansion of power of a given differentiated sphere conflicts with harmonious cultural development and occurs at the expense of the healthy development of the other cultural spheres.
Such a disharmonious cultural unfolding results in a reductionist perspective of reality and accounts for the various "isms" such as vitalism, aestheticism, economism, romanticism, etc. Repeatedly, the history of Western culture has shown that apostate man is inclined to present one aspect of reality in its completeness and then reduce all the others to the point where they become manifestations of the absolutized aspect.

Thus, while apostate man may discover certain moments of truth, indeed even discover them in advance of, or even in opposition to Christians, he integrates these moments into a false view of reality. (We may note the similarity to Van Til's perspective at this point.) The "Divine irony", as Dooyeweerd calls it, that lies within this whole process is that the discovery of and insight into a particular aspect of created reality does contain a moment of truth and there is a real contribution to the unfolding of culture and the outworking of the cultural mandate. (This is an emphasis that Van Til allows for but never works out.)

Thus, while God uses the apostate powers further to unfold the potentials of creation, it is in their very contribution that their apostacy is revealed. Hence, the Divine irony. But, as Dooyeweerd states, "an opening process of faith in apostacy from divine revelation of the Word can be understood as a process whereby man becomes self-conscious in his apostacy." However similar to Van Til this may sound, there is a difference in that this self-consciousness does not necessarily signal the apocalypse (as Van Til seems to imply). For unless there
is a turning to the Truth, apostate man will simply turn to some other cultural aspect and absolutize it. He will exchange one idol for another.

Such a perspective allows for a greater justice to be done to the contributions of the unregenerate than Van Til seems to allow for, while still maintaining the antithesis. In fact, such a position can only be maintained with the understanding that, as Dooyeweerd says, "common grace does not weaken or eliminate the antithesis (opposition) between the ground motives of the Christian religion and the apostate ground motives." It is out of this presupposition that any future development of the doctrine of common grace must proceed.
NOTES

1 Vander Stelt. P&S. p. 263.


3 P&S. p. 264.

4 Young. op. cit. p. 138-139. cf. Van Til's Apologetics syllabus p. 33 where he says that "God's revelation is perspicuous because it is inherently rational."

5 IST. p. 64.

6 SCE. p. 187.

7 IST. p. 32.

8 SCE. p. 187.

9 DF. (1955) p. 42-43


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid. p. 54

13 See Van Til's defense of his use of these terms in response to Dooyeweerd in J&A p. 126. See also Stoker's qualified defense of Van Til on this point p. 53. Van Til defended himself in DF. (1967) by saying, "I do not understand why my critics object when I use such terms.... The charge of 'intellectual anabaptism' might well be lodged against me if, as a teacher of Christian apologetics, I failed to translate Christian truth in the language of the day. Is not the important thing that Christian meanings be contrasted with non-Christian meanings? (p.23) We are willing to concede this point to Van Til, to a certain extent. However, we would also maintain that he was more influenced by neo-idealist categories than he was willing to admit, and hence captive to its own setting-of-the-problem and thought patterns.
Herman Dooyeweerd. "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought" in J&A. p. 86. The quotation is from Calvin's *Institutes* (I,5,9).

Robert Knudsen. "Progressive and Regressive Tendencies in Christian Apologetics" in J&A. p. 296. See also his article "Crosscurrents" in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXV (Spring, 1973) p. 303-314. I consider these articles to be the definitive critique of Van Til's theology as a whole. They reflect a positive appreciation of Van Til's contribution to Christian apologetics while at the same time criticize the speculative elements in his thought. It is highly unfortunate that Van Til choose to respond in such a harsh manner to Knudsen's criticism. See Van Til's response in J&A. p. 298 ff.

P&S. p. 269.

Stoker, J&A. p. 46.

Frame, op. cit. p. 12. Frame probably would not agree with the assessment that there are substantive reasons for this.


For a similar critique see Daane op. cit. pp. 124-125.

Knudsen. "Crosscurrents" op. cit. p. 309. See also SCE. pp. 72, 96, 144.

Ibid.

This is Knudsen's phrase.

Stoker, for instance, proposes that the entire history of the term "universal" presupposes the false problem of whether and to what extent reality can be grasped in terms of general concepts of thought, thereby implying that reality should conform to the nature of general concepts of human thought. And, the terms "rational", "rationality", etc. presuppose a wrong stress on reason as distinct from understanding (J&A. p. 53-54). Similarly Knudsen suggests that Van Til's understanding of the Creator/creature relationship sanctions the "run-of-the-mill understanding of the subject-object relationship." He has "screened out" the possibility of a reinterpretation of the problem as constructed by Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. ("Crosscurrents" op. cit. p. 312.)

Zuidema. op. cit. p. 54.
The word "relative" was used to modify Kuyper's "cultural optimism." Kuyper was no post-millennial triumphalist.


Ibid. p. 15.

Daane was correct in asserting this over against Van Til op. cit. p. 141.

Herman Dooyeweerd. Roots of Western Culture (Toronto: Wedge, 1979) p. 108.

See Brian Walsh and Jon Chaplin's "Dooyeweerd's Contribution To a Christian Philosophical Paradigm" (unpublished paper available from The Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Ontario, nd.), p. 21.


Dooyeweerd. Roots. op. cit. p. 104.

Ibid. p. 38.
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