

**THE FUTURE OF**  
**REFORMED**  
**APOLOGETICS**

**THE FUTURE OF  
REFORMED  
APOLOGETICS**

**COLLECTED ESSAYS ON APPLYING  
VAN TIL'S APOLOGETIC METHOD  
TO A NEW GENERATION**

**CONTRIBUTORS**

**K. Scott Oliphint | Daniel Strange | Christopher Watkin**

**James Anderson | Vern Poythress | W. Rob Edwards**

**Brian Mattson | Nathan D. Shannon | David O. Filson**

**EDITED BY K. SCOTT OLIPHINT**

*The Future of Reformed Apologetics*

Copyright © 2024 by Westminster Seminary Press

All Rights Reserved. No part of the copyrighted material may be reproduced without the written consent of the publisher, except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment. Every effort has been made to trace any remaining copyright holders and obtain permission to reproduce this material. For inquiries and information, contact Westminster Seminary Press: 2960 Church Road, Glenside, Pennsylvania 19038, or at [wsp@wts.edu](mailto:wsp@wts.edu).

Printed and Bound in the United States of America

Cover design by Foreknown

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-955859-12-7

# CONTENTS

	Foreword: <i>WTS Van Til Conference: The Legacy of Van Til</i> . . . . .	vii
	William Edgar	
	Introduction . . . . .	xv
	K. Scott Oliphint	
1	Van Til and the <i>Sensus Divinitatis</i> . . . . .	1
	K. Scott Oliphint	
2	Van Til Goes Pop: <i>Desire, Diff-enchantment, and the Point of Contact</i> . . . . .	25
	Daniel Strange	
3	Van Til's Apologetic: <i>Attributes, Roots, and Fruits</i> . . . . .	49
	Brian G. Mattson	
4	The Robust Role of General Revelation in Van Til's Apologetic: <i>Reasserting the Relationship between God's Word and God's World</i> . . . . .	69
	W. Rob Edwards	
5	Van Til's Two-Handed Apologetics: <i>Lessons for the Future of Christian Thought</i> . . . . .	95
	Christopher Watkin	
6	Van Til Versus <i>The Matrix</i> : <i>A Van Tilian Response to the Simulation Hypothesis</i> . . . . .	115
	James N. Anderson	

7	<b>Implications of Van Til's Thought for Redeeming Academic Disciplines</b> .....	137
	Vern Poythress	
8	<b>Van Til on God as Absolute Person: <i>Origin, Meaning, and Function</i></b> .....	155
	Nathan D. Shannon	
9	<b>Old Things Made New? <i>The Buswellian Vintage of Van Tillian Criticism</i></b> .....	173
	David O. Filson	

# IMPLICATIONS OF VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

BY VERN S. POYTHRESS

**C**ornelius Van Til is known primarily for his ground-breaking work in apologetics. But his apologetic work also has implications for Christian transformation of every academic discipline. It is this contribution to the understanding of academic disciplines that we wish to explore.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF REFORMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

Why might it be important to reform academic disciplines? The reform of academics can be compared to church discipline. It is fairly standard in Reformed churches to have a statement concerning three reasons for church discipline. The PCA Rules of Discipline is an example:

In its proper usage discipline maintains:

- a. the glory of God,
- b. the purity of His Church,
- c. the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners.<sup>38</sup>

Academic disciplines need reform for three analogous reasons. First, Christ is Lord of all (Eph. 1:21–22). All thoughts in any sphere of life must conform to his Lordship (2 Cor. 10:4–5). Christians reform academic disciplines for the sake of the glory of God and the glory of Christ the Lord.

Second, we need reform for the sake of the purity of the church. False and deviant ideas from the academic world have wide influence, and often serve as a factor in leading astray Christ’s sheep. Consider, for example, the influence of Darwinism, understood as it often is as an atheistic system that enables us to dispense with God. More broadly, natural sciences may be used by some people to try to discredit the very possibility of miracles. Historians may try to reconstruct the history behind the Bible in such a way as to eliminate the miraculous and the presence of God in history. Sociology may be used to promote ungodly views of the meaning of sex, money, race, and authority. The church needs protection from the world, and the critique and reform of academic disciplines serves this purpose.

Third, we need reform for the sake of “reclaiming of disobedient sinners,” as the Rules of Discipline say. The Rules of Discipline are of course thinking of people who once claimed to be Christian and who became members of a church, but who are now caught in sin. In the case of academic disciplines, many non-Christian people are caught in a non-Christian view of the world. Their understanding of the world is often reinforced by academic disciplines that approach their field of research with the assumption that the Christian God does not exist. A secular atmosphere, especially when reinforced by

---

38 *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 2022, §27-3, <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Website-BCO-2022-Full-Book-WITH-BOOKMARKS.pdf>, accessed Feb. 27, 2023.

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

the prestige of universities and major media, makes non-Christians assume that Christianity is a quaint, outmoded relic of the past, which the latest knowledge shows to be false and also irrelevant. Within such a situation, having critical analysis of academic disciplines can sometimes serve to show people that genuine Christian faith does not reject the use of the mind and the use of evidence and the use of reason. The problem is that sin penetrates and corrupts all three of these, and the effects filter into the wider society. The opposition between academic disciplines and Christianity does not show that Christianity is untrue, only that academic disciplines are corrupt. It can help people if they can see that corruption in some detail, and compare it with a positive, coherent, thoughtful alternative, offered on a Christian basis.

### BACKGROUND IN ABRAHAM KUYPER

Where did Cornelius Van Til receive a heritage that included the idea of reforming academic disciplines? We may begin with a simple sketch of Van Til's contribution in relation to its historical background. The idea of a distinctively Christian approach to academic disciplines does not originate with Van Til. Rather, Van Til builds on the heritage of Abraham Kuyper, who emphasizes that Christ is Lord of all of life. Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*<sup>39</sup> tries to show that lack of submission to the Lordship of Christ leads to a bifurcation in various areas of life. The chapters in *Lectures on Calvinism* cover successively life-system, religion, politics, science, art, and the future. In conformity with the broader European usage, Kuyper includes within "science" not only natural sciences but all academic disciplines (German, *Wissenschaft*; Dutch, *wetenschap*).<sup>40</sup> According to Kuyper, the antithesis between two "life-systems,"

---

39 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (reprint; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008). See Vern S. Poythress, *The Lordship of Christ: Serving Our Savior All of the Time, in All of Life, with All of Our Heart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

40 Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 99.



## THE FUTURE OF REFORMED APOLOGETICS

Christian and non-Christian, leads to an antithesis that runs through the academic disciplines formed under the influence of the life-systems. The antithesis, however, is qualified by “common grace,” by which Kuyper designates the blessings of God falling on the good and the evil (Matt. 5:45). The affirmation of common grace leads to a positive appreciation of contributions by non-Christians.

### VAN TIL'S APOLOGETICS

Van Til continues Kuyper's themes of antithesis and common grace, and develops them in the context of apologetics. Van Til's apologetics has two sides to it. The *negative* side is his critique of non-Christian systems; the *positive* side is the setting forth of the gospel in the context of a larger Christian worldview. The negative side proves to be especially important. Van Til tried to show that a non-Christian system of thought cannot provide an adequate account of itself, or of the world, or of knowledge of the world. A non-Christian system is condemned to oscillate between a barren would-be autonomous rationalism and a chaos-affirming irrationalism. The two can only destroy one another. A non-Christian system survives only by secretly—and inconsistently—borrowing from the Christian view of the way things are (through “common grace”).

### DEFENDING GOD AS TRINITARIAN

Earlier approaches to apologetics had usually approached the task in stages. First try to establish the existence of a God of some kind, and later add evidences from the Bible for the fact that this God is specifically Trinitarian and has disclosed himself to us in the person and work of Christ. Or, first give evidence for the resurrection of Christ, and later establish from the testimony of Christ and his followers the nature of God and the way of salvation. Van Til rejects such piecemeal approaches. He insists that Christianity should be defended *as a unit*. Christians who defend it should not try to

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

establish or pretend to establish some ground for argument from principles independent of Christianity. Rather, they are supposed to make it clear that they are speaking *as Christians*, as those who are committed followers of Christ and whose view of the world, of human knowledge, and of the very nature of argument is shaped by that commitment. There is no “religious neutrality.” A person is either for Christ or against him.<sup>41</sup>

Van Til's commitment to defending Christianity as a unit includes an affirmation of God as the Trinitarian God. Any “God” that an apologist tries to erect on the basis of arguments acceptable to non-Christians is bound to be a false god, no better than an idol. The true God is the God of the Bible, who is irreducibly Trinitarian. He is not first of all one God, and then somehow transforms himself into a Trinity. No, he is forever and ever one God who is three persons. It is true that the Old Testament emphasizes primarily the unity of the one true God, in contrast to the many false gods of ancient Near Eastern religions. The Old Testament contains adumbrations or foreshadowings of the Trinity, but the full revelation of the Trinity blossoms in the New Testament. This progress is a progress in *revelation* to humanity, not a “progress” in God himself, in God's nature. God is always and only the Trinitarian God.

### THE ONE AND THE MANY

With the commitment to the Trinitarian God, Van Til is in a position to claim that only *this* God answers the classical problem of the one and the many.<sup>42</sup> Non-Christian systems all have to confront this problem at a deep, foundational level. No non-Christian system has

---

41 Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008); elsewhere throughout Van Til's writings; and especially in the useful summary, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, 3–21, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 3–21.

42 Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 46–51.

a satisfactory answer. One kind of answer prioritizes the one, as the source for everything else. But if the one is truly one, how does it produce any differentiation into many? Conversely, if the many are at the origin, as in Heraclitus and in ancient Greek atomism, how can the many ever produce any substantive unity? Van Til proclaims that the Trinity provides the source of the one and the many with “equal ultimacy.” The oneness of the one God is not logically or temporally prior or foundational to the many of the three persons—that would be a form of the modalist heresy. Neither are the three persons logically or temporally prior or foundational to the oneness of the one God—that would be a form of tritheism.

Not all readers of Van Til are persuaded by his appeal to the Trinity. Christian apologists continue to approach the task of apologetics in several ways. But the fundamental challenge does remain for any human being who is interacting with the world that God made. The world observably has both unities and diversities, both one and many. For example, there is one species of domestic dogs, and many dogs representing the species. There is one race of human beings, and many human beings who are members of the race. An individual cannot engage in any kind of interaction among plural human beings without tacitly *presupposing* what everyone in fact knows to be the case: there is a common humanity (the one) and a diversity of members (the many). If there is no commonality, communication ceases. If there is no diversity, communication is pointless. Nor can people hope for fruitful interaction with the world without using language, which has single words like *dog* to designate a plurality of creatures (the many, the individual dogs).

So where does this unity and diversity in the world come from? If the unity is prior, how did it split up? If the diversity is prior, how did it come to have unity? If the world is just “there,” with no explanation at all, no one can depend on it. Van Til’s explanation includes the affirmation that people know God, as Romans 1:18–23 states, but that they suppress that knowledge. They are nevertheless secretly depending on God. And among the dependencies is a dependence

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

on God who is one and many for a universe that is one and many, together.

Van Til's principle about the one and the many has immediate applications to every academic discipline. Every academic discipline is produced by human thought. And human thought relies on the one and the many at numerous points. We may include three of them already mentioned. (1) A student in any academic discipline has to know something about what it means to have plural human beings (the many) who can share common knowledge (the one). (2) The student has to know something about what it means to use a word (the one) to designate a plurality of objects of thought (the many). (3) The student has to have confidence that the appearance of one and many in the very structure of the world is not illusory.

Van Til's focus on the theme of the one and the many therefore provides a crucial critical tool for assessing any academic discipline. Critical analysis can examine whether some advocates within a discipline prioritize the one, or prioritize the many, or whether they oscillate back and forth in an inconsistency. The theme of the one and the many also reminds us of the unacknowledged divine source behind everything in the discipline.

### RATIONALISM AND IRRATIONALISM

Another tool for critical analysis is found in Van Til's themes of rationalism and irrationalism. The focal issue here is not the nature of things, but the nature of *knowledge*. How do human beings know? According to the Christian viewpoint, human beings know in imitation of God's knowledge. God gives people true (though partial) knowledge out of the fullness of his infinite knowledge. Non-Christian thought sees itself as ultimate, rather than dependent on God. So it must claim that knowledge can be established by human reason and observation. This is a kind of rationalism. But when non-Christian thought falls short, because it is not in fact godlike knowledge, it falls into irrationalism. Whatever cannot be analyzed by human

thought must be declared to be innately irrational, rather than a sign of the mystery of God's infinite knowledge and the finiteness of human knowledge. Van Til shows repeatedly how a non-Christian approach cannot give an adequate account of knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

### WAYS FOR CHRISTIANS TO CONTRIBUTE TO AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

The distinctive contributions of Kuyper and Van Til can help to categorize different ways in which Christian believers may contribute to any academic discipline.

(1) *Broad service.* The first and “widest” way to contribute is to participate in a broad way in the academic discipline, as a service to God and to humanity. A Christian does not consider only himself (Phil. 2:3–4), but attempts to approve and support what is good among fellow participants, as a matter of common grace. A Christian may also make a contribution himself, by the gifts that God has given, and by offering diligent, faithful, humble, truthful, and loving service. There is nothing to be despised about this kind of service; it is not inferior to the more focused forms of service that we consider below. As an example in biology, one example of a small contribution would be a technical paper on the molecular mechanisms involved in the contraction of smooth muscle cells.<sup>44</sup>

(2) *A specifically Christian-theistic insight.* The second form of contribution is to offer a specifically Christian insight within one's academic discipline. In biology, the reconstruction of the past history of life depends on whether one believes in the possibility of miracle. So a Christian's reconstruction of the past—in particular the past of

---

43 Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (n.l.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969); Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023).

44 I admit my bias in choosing the specialization of my son's doctoral dissertation: Ransom Poythress, “Focal Adhesion Protein Dynamics and the Role of Endosomes in Contractile, Fully Differentiated, Vascular Smooth Muscle,” Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 2013.

the human race, with Adam and Eve at the headwaters—differs from a non-Christian's reconstruction.<sup>45</sup> Some of the differences may be shared between Christians and theists of other religions (orthodox Judaism; Islam). Others may not.

(3) *Insight fitting into a larger Christian framework.* The third form of contribution is to build a larger Christian framework for understanding the whole discipline, or to make a contribution to a Christian framework that already exists for the discipline in question. This kind of larger framework seems to be an aspect of what Kuyper called for and hoped to begin. Kuyper was instrumental in the founding of the Free University of Amsterdam, as a specifically *Christian* university, so that Christians might have a space in which to build distinctive contributions. In biology, such distinctiveness might take the form of an explicitly Christian advocacy for the special character of major life transitions in the past record of the fossils, as well as the affirmation of the possibility of a special activity of God in creating new “kinds” of plants and animals (according to the language of “kinds” in Gen. 1:11–13, 20–25). It might also include an attention to purpose and to designed structure in examining current life forms.

What does this third form of contribution add? The difficulty with having just the first two forms of contribution, by themselves, is that distinctively Christian contributions can easily be lost or suppressed or at least discouraged by a hostile atmosphere. They may exist and shine for a moment, but there is little environment for them to flourish and grow. There may result pieces here and there, scattered in the crannies of the discipline, with no one to gather them together and see a larger unity.

(4) *An attention to the one and the many.* A fourth kind of contribution would be one that specifically pays attention to the problem of the one and the many, or to the problem of rationalism and irrationalism in knowledge, and that specifically links the problem to

---

45 See, for example, J. P. Versteeg, *Adam in the New Testament: Mere Teaching Model or First Historical Man?* trans. and foreword by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).

the Christian solution. This fourth type of contribution comes closest to singling out what is the new and original contribution of Van Til. Abraham Kuyper in his time endorses the first three kinds of contribution. It is Van Til who emphasizes the problem of the one and the many and the problem of rationalism and irrationalism.

### A TAXONOMY OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

The distinction between the four different kinds of contributions is not meant to be air-tight. There can be combinations and overlaps. But the distinction leads naturally to a classification of historical developments. In the period of the Reformation, the Reformers emphasized the dignity of ordinary work and of distinct “callings” in work. They opposed the idea that to be a monk or a nun or a priest was a spiritually “superior” work that degraded the value of baking or making shoes or raising children. Seen historically, the affirmation of the dignity of work, including work in a variety of academic disciplines, was not culturally “obvious,” but an insight informed by the Bible. The Reformers used this insight to encourage people in all walks of life to render “service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man” (Eph. 6:7). This emphasis is the Protestant emphasis, in contrast to the traditional Roman Catholic emphasis on “holy” vocations, for the monk and the nun and the priest.

The second kind of contribution, that of a specifically Christian insight, is implicit in the first. But it becomes increasingly important as European and American society becomes more secularized, and the teaching in the universities turns away from the influence of Christian thinking. This kind of insight can come from anyone who is an evangelical, determined to be faithful to Christ in the midst of prevailing non-Christian currents of thought around him.

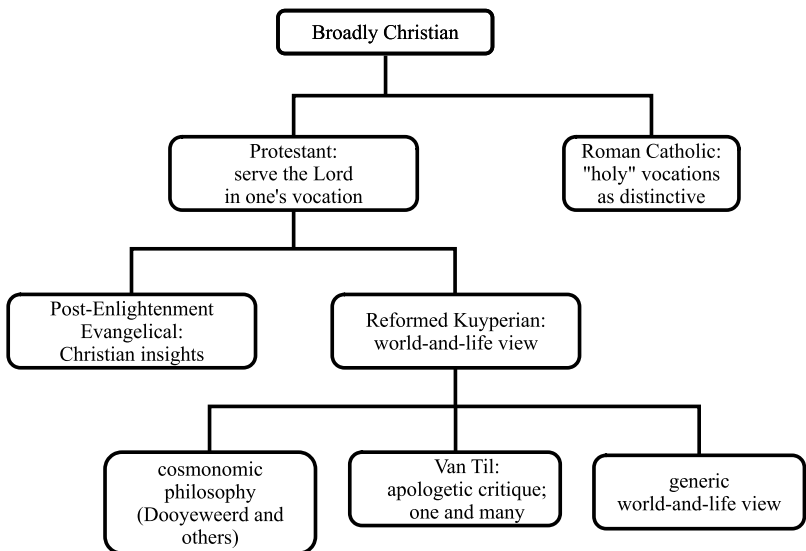
The third kind of contribution requires a larger framework. So it is more likely to appear within the circles of Reformed tradition that Kuyper influenced. There are at least three main substreams

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

influenced by Kuyper. First, there is the neo-Kuyperian substream represented by the cosmonomic philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd and others. Second, there is the substream that has built on Van Til. And third, there is a broader cultural circle in which people talk about a “Reformed world-and-life view.” The third substream may of course include many variations. The overarching framework is there, in the form of this “world-and-life view.” But it may be vague in its details. Dooyeweerd, by contrast, offers us a very specific system and a specific framework. But in the case of his cosmonomic philosophy, there are still variations among his contemporaries, like D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and Hendrik G. Stocker, and among his followers in the next generation. Van Til does not offer us a specific framework for particular academic disciplines, but his theme of the one and the many and his emphasis on the Trinity are distinct. By comparison, Dooyeweerd’s system looks more like a general theistic system.

We may sum up the landscape of contributions in a diagram (see Fig. 1).

*Figure 1: Kinds of Contributions and Their Prerequisites*





## CONTINUED INFLUENCE OF VAN TIL

The people who have been influenced by Van Til have continued to examine academic disciplines in the light of his insights. Within the sphere of his influence, we may roughly distinguish three kinds of products.

First, many have used Van Til in a broad way in applying his critical insights to academic disciplines. They have learned from both Kuyper and Van Til to filter the ideas found in unreformed academic disciplines. Kuyper's emphasis on antithesis already contains the impulse to engage in such critical analysis. But Van Til further develops the skill. One of the early outstanding contributors is Jay Adams, the founder of the tradition of biblical counseling (earlier named nouthetic counseling). Adams as a pastor and then as a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary was concerned to provide a framework for pastoral care and pastoral counseling for young men training for pastoral ministry. The Puritans had written a great deal about pastoral care. But in the twentieth century there had grown up a tradition, or rather multiple competing traditions, of psychotherapy, most of which used a medical model as their predominant framework. This framework was in stark contrast to the biblical teaching about sin and redemption and sanctification. On the basis of the principle of antithesis, Adams was willing to reject the foundations for secular counseling and psychotherapy, and to rethink the foundations on a Christian basis. The principle of common grace gave Adams scope to appreciate positively the individual insights that were scattered in secular writings, but at the same time to reframe the whole of the discipline. In succeeding generations, others have built on Adams and further refined the theory and practice of biblical counseling.<sup>46</sup>

---

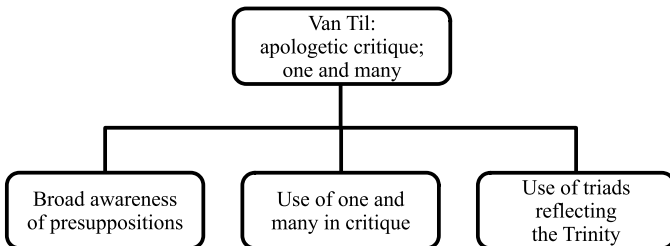
46 Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1970, 1986); Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986); David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010); Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

Second, some people have explicitly used Van Til's insights about the one and the many. When they consider any academic discipline, they come to their analysis with the question of the one and the many already in hand. How does the discipline handle the question of the origin of the one and the many, both in the arena of ontology, the nature of things, and in the arena of epistemology, how people come to a *knowledge* of things? How do the twin themes of rationalism and irrationalism play out in the theory of human knowledge?

Third, some people have explored how the doctrine of the Trinity might be a more explicit source for critical analysis. The starting point is not the rather abstract terminology of one and many, but rather the one and the three. It is not just *any* one and three, but the one God and the three persons. With the Trinity come also related formulations. Trinitarian doctrine needs to say that all three persons have the same divine attributes. All are fully God. And as an inference from the simplicity of God, no attribute can be broken off and considered as an abstract concept *behind* God, logically preceding God. In addition, the doctrine of coinherence says that each of the three persons indwells the other two. The doctrine of the Trinity also includes the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. Do any or all of these doctrines have implications for the analysis of academic disciplines? (See Figure 2.)

*Figure 2: Paths Springing from Van Til's Thought*



Dorothy L. Sayers, Kenneth L. Pike, and John M. Frame, apparently independent of one another, have all uncovered ways in which the Trinity is the foundation for patterns in the world, including patterns in academic disciplines.<sup>47</sup> Sayers focuses on the theory of artistic creation; Kenneth Pike focuses on language and linguistics; Frame focuses on theology and ethics. Each of them engage in a tri-perspectival analysis of their field. The three perspectives suggest a kind of derivative form of coinherence, analogous to the archetypal coinherence among the persons of the Trinity.

The idea that traces of the Trinity (*vestigia trinitatis*) can be seen in the world is an old one. Augustine and Aquinas both employed some analogies from the created order in expounding the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>48</sup> But Sayers, Pike, and Frame develop further implications from Trinitarian doctrine. For them, the point is not to understand the Trinity better by employing some analogies from creation (as it seems to be in Augustine and Aquinas); the point is to understand something in created order better by employing the analogy of the Trinity.

It is well known that John Frame repeatedly employs two triads of perspectives. The triad for ethics consists in three perspectives on the field of ethics and Christian living: the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential (or personal) perspective. In addition, particularly in discussing the doctrine of God, Frame has a second triad, the triad for lordship, which consists in

---

47 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (reprint; Grand Rapids, MI: Harper-Collins, 1987); Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008)," <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>; Vern S. Poythress, "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, 173–200, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), <https://frame-poythress.org/multiperspectivalism-and-the-reformed-faith/>, especially the part that begins by discussing the contribution of Kenneth L. Pike.

48 Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), 370–375.

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

three perspectives on the meaning of God's lordship: the perspective of authority, the perspective of control, and the perspective of presence.<sup>49</sup> Each of the two triads exhibits a correlation with the persons of the Trinity. And the coinherence of the perspectives, each of which is a perspective on the *whole*, reflects the archetypal coinherence of the persons of the Trinity.

Consider also Kenneth Pike's triad of perspectives on linguistic units, the triad consisting in contrast, variation, and distribution.<sup>50</sup> *Contrast*, or contrastive-identificational features, is closely related to the identity and uniqueness of a particular unit; it corresponds to Van Til's principle of unity. *Variation* is the spectrum of range open to a particular unit, and corresponds to Van Til's principle of diversity. *Distribution* is the expected contexts in which a unit occurs. It is a third perspective on a unit. Each of these three perspectives corresponds preeminently to one of three persons of the Trinity.<sup>51</sup> So together, they articulate Van Til's concern for the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in the Trinity. Kenneth Pike originally developed the three perspectives in the context of linguistic analysis. But they are general enough to be applied to any academic discipline. So they provide a specifically Trinitarian basis for analysis of the discipline.

I myself have tried to develop coherently the implications of Frame's triads and those of Pike. Sayers uses a single triad for reflecting on communication, and that triad corresponds to the triad for communication discussed in *Knowing and the Trinity*.<sup>52</sup> These and

---

49 John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008)"; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives on Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018), chaps. 13–14.

50 Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts*, chaps. 6–8.

51 Vern S. Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 no. 1 (1995): 187–219, <https://frame-poythress.org/reforming-ontology-and-logic-in-the-light-of-the-trinity-an-application-of-van-tils-idea-of-analogy/>, accessed Mar. 13, 2023; Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 152–58.

52 Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, 63–68, 129–34.

other perspectival triads can prove fruitful in transforming various academic disciplines: hermeneutics, natural science, linguistics, sociology, logic, mathematics, philosophy, computer science, art, and history.<sup>53</sup>

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF GEERHARDUS VOS, THROUGH BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

One significant contribution to this program of reforming academic disciplines has come from an unexpected quarter—namely biblical theology. Geerhardus Vos in his foundational work on biblical theology refounded a discipline that went astray in earlier generations.<sup>54</sup> Vos's work encouraged exploration of major themes in the Bible as a whole and in individual books of the Bible. These themes often cut across the traditional organization of categories in systematic theology. Vos himself believed that biblical theology and systematic theology should work together in harmony. But the harmony would be a complex harmony, because the distinct disciplines would to some extent organize their material in distinct ways. Within the discipline of biblical theology, each major biblical theme could constitute a

---

53 Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999); *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); *In the Beginning Was the Word; Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); *Redeeming Mathematics: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Jonathan R. Stoddard, *Computer Science: Discovering God's Glory in Ones and Zeros* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, and P&R, 2015); David A. Covington, *A Redemptive Theology of Art: Restoring Godly Aesthetics to Doctrine and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Our Thinking about History: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Reason: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

54 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (reprint; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003); earlier edition in 1948.

## VAN TIL'S THOUGHT FOR REDEEMING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

distinct “center,” of sorts, which would show a multitude of relations to other themes.

Biblical theology then supplied the analysts of culture and academic disciplines with new tools for exploration.<sup>55</sup> John Frame's development of his triad for lordship is due to his considering the Bible from the standpoint of biblical theology.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, one can explore the topic of human language and linguistics using the theme of divine communication and divine speech as a starting perspective.<sup>57</sup> The use of these biblical themes provides a more direct link between the Bible and modern themes than is typically the case if one just uses general philosophical categories in trying to construct linkages.

### CONCLUSION

The theological world is still in the process of digesting the fruitfulness of Van Til's apologetics and Geerhardus Vos's biblical theology. Both contribute to the reform of academic disciplines.<sup>58</sup> Reform of academic disciplines also has the potential for reinforcing Van Til's insights about the impossibility of religious neutrality. Other schools of apologetics have attempted to carve out some minimal base, in the form of a religiously neutral starting point. From such a starting point shared with non-Christians, it is hoped that apologetic arguments can proceed. But if Van Til's program leads to the reform of academic disciplines, it makes it clear that these disciplines do not offer a common base. Rather, one has to choose between non-Christian and Christian forms of each discipline. This choice confronts people even in the disciplines of logic and mathematics, which many people have thought to be religiously neutral.<sup>59</sup> If one must adopt either a

---

55 Poythress, *Lordship of Christ*, chap. 9.

56 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 8.

57 Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*.

58 Poythress, *Lordship of Christ*, chap. 9.

59 Poythress, *Logic; Redeeming Mathematics*.

## THE FUTURE OF REFORMED APOLOGETICS

Christian or a non-Christian approach to logic at the beginning, no argument using logic can be mounted in a neutral sphere. The same holds with respect to any academic discipline—none of them offers religious neutrality. Van Til's approach to apologetics becomes the only remaining option. Consistency requires us to rely on the one true God, the God of the Bible, as we engage in any apologetic argument.