

## CHAPTER 1

# CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Detailed replies to the detailed criticisms made of my views by the critics mentioned would not be very useful unless seen in the light of the general structure of my thought. Then too, Daane has specifically dealt with this general structure so far as he found it expressed in *Common Grace*. It would be quite impossible to deal with his criticism otherwise than by stating what I myself consider the structure of my thought to have been, and to be.

Now the basic structure of my thought is very simple. I have never been called upon to work out any form of systematic theology. My business is to teach apologetics. I therefore presuppose the Reformed system of doctrine.<sup>1</sup> I try to show my students that it is this system of doctrine that men need. Since most students have not had much systematic theology when they first come to my classes, I give them a brief survey of it. Then as they take courses in

1. As we noted in the introduction, this statement is highly significant, bears repeating here, and should be noted. Van Til never saw himself as doing anything other than applying the Reformed system of doctrine to the specific concerns of apologetics. Because of this methodology, what Van Til was advocating was both old and new. It was *old* in that he was applying the basic tenets of Reformed dogmatics to apologetics; he was not attempting self-consciously to change any of the basic content or loci of that theology. It was *new* in that apologetics, prior to Van Til, had taken less notice of theology as the springboard for its tasks and more notice of philosophy. The radical nature of this methodology should be kept in mind.

systematic theology with my colleague, Professor John Murray,<sup>2</sup> they come to me again and look at the apologetic problem afresh.

An examination of my syllabus on *Apologetics*<sup>3</sup> shows that the first chapter deals with the question, *what* we are to believe and defend? We must defend Christian-theism as a unit.

It is impossible and useless to seek to defend Christianity as an historical religion by a discussion of facts only. We say that Christ arose from the grave. We say further that this resurrection proves his divinity. This is the nerve of the historical argument for Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Yet a pragmatist philosopher<sup>5</sup> will refuse to follow this line of reasoning. Granted he allows that Christ actually arose from the grave, he will say that this proves nothing more than that something very unusual took place in the case of that man Jesus. The pragmatist's philosophy is that everything in this universe is unrelated and that such a fact as the resurrection of Jesus, granted it were a fact, would have no significance for us who live two thousand years after him. It is apparent from this that if we would really defend Christianity as a historical religion, we must at the same time defend the theism upon which Christianity is based, and this involves us in philosophical discussion.<sup>6</sup>

But to engage in philosophical discussion does not mean that we begin without Scripture. We do not first defend theism philosophi-

2. John Murray (1898–1975) earned his M.A. from Glasgow University in 1923 and his Th.B. and Th.M. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1927. While studying theology at New College, Edinburgh, Murray was invited by Caspar Wistar Hodge to join him as an assistant in systematic theology at Princeton Seminary in 1929. After serving one year at Princeton, Murray was invited by Machen to teach systematic theology at the one-year-old Westminster Theological Seminary. He taught systematics at Westminster from 1930 until his retirement on January 1, 1967. Upon retirement, Murray returned to Scotland, where he married, fathered two children, and carried on preaching and pastoral ministries until his death.

3. The syllabus to which Van Til refers, though evolving over the years beyond the edition he quotes here, is now published as Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003). Van Til will incorporate much of this material into the present work, including the bulk of this chapter.

4. As we will see, Van Til has in mind here such works as Wilbur Moorehead Smith, *Therefore, Stand: A Plea for a Vigorous Apologetic in the Present Crisis of Evangelical Christianity* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1945).

5. Pragmatism is one of the only distinctly American philosophies. Its basic tenet is that meaning resides not in propositions but in consequences. One of Van Til's pragmatist foils, William James (1842–1910), defined the pragmatic method as an attempt to find meaning by tracing the practical consequences of a concept or notion. Thus, pragmatism disavowed metaphysics. Though it may appear that pragmatism and idealism are antithetical to each other, Van Til argued in his doctoral dissertation that the two are, at bottom, one. See Cornelius Van Til, "God and the Absolute" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1927).

6. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (syllabus, 1942), 2.

cally by an appeal to reason and experience in order, after that, to turn to Scripture for our knowledge and defense of Christianity. We get our theism as well as our Christianity from the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible is thought of as authoritative on everything of which it speaks. And *it speaks of everything*.<sup>8</sup> We do not mean that it speaks of football games, of atoms, etc., directly, but we do mean that it speaks of everything either directly or indirectly. It tells us not only of the Christ and his work, but also of who God is and whence the universe has come. It gives us a philosophy of history as well as history. Moreover, the information on these subjects is woven into an inextricable whole. It is only if you reject the Bible as the Word of God that you can separate its so-called religious and moral instruction from what it says, e.g., about the physical universe.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore the system of truth as contained in Scripture that we must present to the world. The various theological disciplines contribute to the setting forth of this system. It is the business of dogmatic or systematic theology to set forth this system under several main headings. So we take the headings of systematic theology as we find them worked out, for instance, in such manuals as Professor Louis Berkhof<sup>10</sup> has written. In them we find discussions on (a) the doctrine of God, (b) the doctrine of man, (c) the doctrine of Christ, (d) the doctrine of the church, (e) the doctrine of salvation, and (f) the doctrine of the last things.

In each case the Reformed position is shown to be that which Scripture teaches. The Romanist, the Arminian, and other views are shown not to be fully biblical. So before turning to the question of the defense of the Reformed Faith, we must know, in general, what it is.

7. This is a central point in Van Til's thought. It does not mean that everything we say must have a verse from the Bible to support it. Rather, as Van Til makes clear in numerous places, it means that our defense of Christianity depends on the system of truth revealed to us in Scripture. For Van Til, that system of truth is expressed in the historic Reformed creeds of the church.

8. For example, when Scripture says that God created the heavens and the earth, it tells us that *everything* that is, except God, is created.

9. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (syllabus), 2.

10. Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) was a professor at Calvin Seminary from 1906 to 1944, and would have taught Van Til systematic theology. He studied at Princeton from 1902 to 1904 under Warfield and Vos. His most influential work is his *Systematic Theology*, which is dependent on Dutch Reformed theology, especially Herman Bavinck. Van Til is likely referring here to a summary of that larger work in Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933).

## 1. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Naturally in the system of theology and in apologetics the doctrine of God is of fundamental importance. We must first ask what kind of a God Christianity believes in before we can really ask with intelligence whether such a God exists.<sup>11</sup> The *what* precedes the *that*; the connotation precedes the denotation; at least the latter cannot be discussed intelligently without at once considering the former.

What do we mean when we use the word “God”? Systematics answers this question in its discussion of the attributes or properties of God. These attributes are divided into incommunicable and communicable.<sup>12</sup> Under the incommunicable attributes we have:

First, independence or aseity of God.<sup>13</sup> By this is meant that God is in no sense correlative to or dependent upon anything beside his own being. God is the source of his own being, or rather the term “source” cannot be applied to God. God is *absolute*. He is sufficient unto himself.

Secondly, we speak of the *immutability* of God. Naturally God does not and cannot change since there is nothing besides his own eternal being on which he depends (Mal. 3:6; James 1:7).

Thirdly, we speak of the infinity of God. In relation to the question of time we speak of the *eternity* of God while with respect to space we speak of the *omnipresence* of God. By the term “eternity” we mean that there is no beginning or end or succession of moments in God’s being or consciousness (Ps. 90:2; 2 Peter 3:8). This conception of eternity is of particular importance in apologetics because it involves the whole

11. This point is central to Van Til’s approach. Generally speaking, in the history of apologetics, the *what* of God has simply been assumed. So, for example, Anselm’s ontological argument *begins* with the notion that God is “that than which no greater can be conceived.” But Van Til is not willing to begin there. He is concerned to ask *how* we know what God is like. In order to prove his existence, therefore, there must be agreement on just what this One is like whose existence is being called into question.

12. This is one of the standard ways to categorize the attributes of God, though there are others (e.g., relative and absolute). Incommunicable attributes are those which cannot be given or “communicated” to anything or anyone in creation—such as immutability. Communicable attributes are those which can be given in creation, such as goodness, though it must be remembered that even if communicated to or in creation, those attributes thereby partake of the aspects of *creation* and not of the *Creator*. Thus, God’s goodness remains his, though the goodness that is in creation is both from him and analogous to his.

13. The word “aseity” is taken from the Latin, *a se*, which means “of himself.” Van Til, in highlighting this aspect of God’s character first, is following Reformed thought in general, which seeks to ground God’s properties, initially, in God’s own pronouncement of his name to Moses as the “I Am.” To miss the implications of this ascription *by* God of his own character is to go astray with respect to every other attribute that God has. For a helpful discussion of this in seventeenth-century Reformed thought, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*; vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), esp. 227–364.

question of the meaning of the temporal universe: it involves a definite philosophy of history. By the term “omnipresence” we mean that God is neither included in space nor absent from it. God is above all space and yet present in every part of it (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 17:27).

Fourthly, we speak of the *unity* of God. We distinguish between the unity of singularity (*singularitatis*) and the unity of simplicity (*simplicitatis*). The unity of singularity has reference to numerical oneness. There is and can be only one God. The unity of simplicity signifies that God is in no sense composed of parts or aspects that existed prior to himself (Jer. 10:10; 1 John 1:5).

The attributes of God are not to be thought of otherwise than as aspects of the one simple original being; the whole is identical with the parts. On the other hand the attributes of God are not characteristics that God has developed gradually; they are fundamental to his being; the parts together form the whole. Of the whole matter we may say that the unity and the diversity in God are equally basic and mutually dependent upon one another. The importance of this doctrine for apologetics may be seen from the fact that the whole problem of philosophy may be summed up in the question of the relation of unity to diversity; the so-called problem of the one and the many receives a definite answer from the doctrine of the simplicity of God.<sup>14</sup>

Man cannot partake of these incommunicable attributes of God. Man cannot in any sense be the source of his own being; man cannot in any sense be immutable or eternal or omnipresent or simple. These attributes therefore emphasize the *transcendence* of God.

Under the communicable attributes we have:

*Spirituality.* God is a Spirit (John 4:24).

*Invisibility.*

*Omniscience.* God knows his own being to its very depths in one eternal act of knowledge. There are no hidden depths in the being of God that he has not explored. God’s knowledge of himself may best be said

14. The doctrine of the simplicity of God, unfashionable in many theological and philosophico-theological circles today, is at the center of a Reformed understanding of who God is. Note that Van Til encourages us to “understand” God’s simplicity in the same way that we “understand” the Trinity, i.e., there is an equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in God. Historically, an important aspect of this doctrine of God’s simplicity is that these distinctions in God are not thought to exist *realiter*. That is, they are not distinctions that should be thought of as “things,” so that the Godhead is a composition of “thing upon thing.” Rather, the distinctions of attributes in the Godhead, because identical with his essence, are *formal* or *modal* distinctions, describing for us the *ways* in which the essence of God exists. Thus, for example, the three persons in the Godhead are not essential distinctions in God, but rather the ways in which the essence of God exists personally. As Muller notes, the Protestant scholastic doctrine of simplicity implies that God is triune, and this doctrine was formulated in the face of different opponents who sought to deny the orthodox understanding of the Trinity. See Muller, *Divine Essence and Attributes*, 271ff.

to be “analytical.”<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that God must by a slow process analyze himself, but it emphasizes that which needs most emphasis, namely, that God does not need to look beyond himself for additions to his knowledge.

Then what about God’s knowledge of the facts of the created world, of the things that exist besides himself? As human beings we must know or interpret the facts after we look at the facts, after they are there and perhaps after they have operated for some time. In the case of God, on the other hand, God’s knowledge of the facts comes first. God knows or interprets the facts before they are facts. It is God’s plan or his comprehensive interpretation of the facts that makes the facts what they are (p. 6).

The incommunicable attributes of God stress his transcendence and the communicable attributes stress his immanence. The two imply one another. A Christian notion of transcendence and a Christian notion of immanence go together.<sup>16</sup>

It is not a sufficient description of Christian theism when we say that as Christians we believe in both the transcendence and the immanence of God while pantheistic systems believe only in the immanence of God and deistic systems believe only in the transcendence of God. The transcendence we believe in is not the transcendence of deism, and the immanence we believe in is not the immanence of pantheism. In the case of deism transcendence virtually means separation, while in the case of pantheism immanence virtually means identification. And if we add separation to identification, we do not have theism as a result. As we mean a certain kind of God when as theists we speak of God, so also we mean a certain kind of transcendence and a certain kind of immanence when we use these terms. The Christian doctrine of God implies a definite conception of the relation of God to the created universe. So also the Christian doctrine of God implies a definite conception of everything in the created universe (pp. 6–7).

15. Van Til is using the term “analytical” in the Kantian sense. An analytic judgment for Kant was one in which the predicate was contained in the subject. Unlike a synthetic judgment, therefore, the meaning of the concept was known in one act, rather than by synthesizing differing concepts. The point Van Til is making is one made in the history of theology, at least since Aquinas: that God’s knowledge is not such that it partakes of any kind of discursive process. In knowing *himself* fully, he *ipso facto* and immediately knows *all things* fully as well.

16. This does not mean that the two go together *in God*. Prior to creation, there was no transcendence or immanence; there was only God. The two go together *given creation*. It is important to note that these are not attributes of God in that sense.

### ***a. The Personality of God***

What we have discussed under the attributes of God may also be summed up by saying that God is *absolute personality*.<sup>17</sup> The attributes themselves speak of self-conscious and moral activity on the part of God. Recognizing that for this intellectual and moral activity God is dependent upon nothing beyond his own being, we see that we have the Reformed doctrine of the *personality* of God. There were no principles of truth, goodness, or beauty that were next to or above God according to which he patterned the world. The principles of truth, goodness, and beauty are to be thought of as identical with God's being; they are the attributes of God.<sup>18</sup> Non-Christian systems of philosophy do not deny personality to God, at least some of them do not, but, in effect, they all agree in denying absolute personality to God. As Christians we say that we can be like God and must be like God in that we are persons but that we must always be unlike God in that he is an absolute person while we are finite persons. Nontheists, on the other hand, maintain that though God may be a greater person than we can ever hope to be, yet we must not maintain this distinction between absolute and finite personality to be a qualitative one.

### ***b. The Trinity***

Another point in the Christian doctrine of God that needs to be mentioned here is the Trinity. We hold that God exists as a tri-personality. "The trinity is the heart of Christianity."<sup>19</sup> The three persons of the Trinity are co-substantial; not one is derived in his substance from either or both of

17. It may be that Van Til has Bavinck's discussion in mind here, given that Bavinck discusses God's absolute personality in contradistinction from pantheism. Worth noting, however, is the following: "Still we have to grant the truth of what the older Fichte said, namely, that personality is a concept borrowed from the human realm and hence, when applied to God, always to some extent falls short. The concept of personality, when applied to God, is not fully adequate and in principle no better than all other anthropomorphisms we use with reference to God. The Christian church and Christian theology, it must be remembered, never used the word 'personality' to describe God's being; and in respect of the three modes of subsistence in that being, they only spoke of persons reluctantly and for lack of a better term." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2., *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 50. In Reformed thought, the notion of personality is meant to include the fact that God has a mind, consciousness, and will.

18. Here Van Til is elaborating on the absoluteness of God's personality and may have in mind specifically the so-called Euthyphro question of Plato, "Is the good good because God says it is, or does God say it is because it is good?" The Christian answer is that the good is good because God says it is. To answer that God says it is *because* it is good is to think of goodness as somehow independent of God, and thus of God as in some significant way dependent on it. This latter way of thinking is typical of most of Western philosophy.

19. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4 vols. (Kampen: Kok, 1923–30), 2:289.

the others. Yet there are three distinct persons in this unity; the diversity and the identity are equally underived.<sup>20</sup>

We have now before us in bare outline the main points of the Christian doctrine of God. Christianity offers the triune God, the absolute personality, containing all the attributes enumerated, as the God in whom we believe. This conception of God is the foundation of everything else that we hold dear. Unless we can believe in this sort of God, it does us no good to be told that we may believe in some other sort of God, or in anything else. For us everything depends for its meaning upon this sort of God. Accordingly we are not interested to have anyone prove to us the existence of any other sort of God but this God. Any other sort of God is no God at all, and to prove that some other sort of God exists is, in effect, to prove that no God exists (p. 7).

## 2. THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

The whole question with which we deal in apologetics is one of the relation between God and man. Hence, next to the doctrine of God the doctrine of man is of fundamental importance.

### *a. The Image of God in Man*

Man is created *in God's image*. He is therefore like God in everything in which a creature can be like God.<sup>21</sup> He is like God in that he too is a personality. This is what we mean when we speak of the image of God in the wider or more general sense. Then when we wish to emphasize the fact that man resembles God especially in the splendor of his moral attributes, we say that when man was created, he had true knowledge, true righteousness, and true holiness. This doctrine is based upon the fact that in the New Testament we are told that Christ came to restore us to true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24). We call this the image of God in the narrower sense. These two cannot be completely separated from one another. It would really be impossible to think of man having been created only with the image of God in the wider sense; every act of man would from the very first have to

20. Van Til is speaking here of the "ontological" Trinity, that is, God as he is in himself, quite apart from what he does in creation (which is what we mean by the "economic" Trinity). This doctrine will be important throughout this volume, and particularly in the discussion of common grace.

21. As Van Til will note, this "likeness" to God is always creaturely likeness and never at any point identity. The notion of image eschews identity. Note also, as Van Til mentions, that the image of God is interpreted broadly to include the fact that the image was not annihilated after the fall, and it is interpreted more narrowly to include the renewal of the Christian in Christ.

be a moral act, an act of choice for or against God. Hence man would even in every act of knowledge manifest true righteousness and true holiness.

Then after emphasizing that man was like God and in the nature of the case had to be like God, we must stress the point that man must always be different from God. Man was *created* in God's image. We have seen that some of God's attributes are incommunicable. Man can never in any sense outgrow his creaturehood. This puts a definite connotation into the expression that man is *like* God. He is like God, to be sure, but always on a creaturely scale. He can never be like God in God's aseity, immutability, infinity, and unity. For that reason the church has embedded into the heart of its confessions the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. God's being and knowledge are absolutely comprehensive; such knowledge is too wonderful for man; he cannot attain unto it. Man was not created with comprehensive knowledge. Man was finite and his finitude was originally no burden to him. Neither could man ever expect to attain to comprehensive knowledge in the future. We cannot expect to have comprehensive knowledge even in heaven. It is true that much will be revealed to us that is now a mystery to us, but in the nature of the case God cannot reveal to us that which as creatures we cannot comprehend; we should have to be God ourselves in order to understand God in the depth of his being. God must always remain mysterious to man.

The significance of this point will appear more fully when we contrast this conception of mystery with the non-Christian conception of mystery that is current today even in Christian circles. The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian conceptions of mystery may be expressed in a word by saying that we hold that there is mystery for man but not for God, while the non-Christian holds that there is either no mystery for God or man or there is mystery for both God and man.

### ***b. Man's Relation to the Universe***

Next to noting that man was created in God's image we must now observe that man was organically related to the universe about him. That is, man was to be prophet, priest, and king under God in this created world. The vicissitudes of the world would depend upon the deeds of man. As a prophet man was to interpret this world, as a priest he was to dedicate this world to God, and as a king he was to rule over it for God. In opposition to this all non-Christian theories hold that the vicissitudes of man and the universe about him are only accidentally and incidentally related to one another.

*c. The Fall of Man*

The fall of man needs emphasis as much as his creation. As we believe that man was once upon a time created by God in the image of God, so we also believe that soon thereafter man through disobedience fell into sin. After we have discussed what we mean by God and what we mean by the creation of man in the image of God, we can readily see what the nature of sin must be. As a creature of God man had to live in accordance with the law of God, that is, in accordance with the ordinances that God had placed in his creation. This law was for the most part not verbally transmitted to man but was created in his being.<sup>22</sup> Man would act in accord with his own true nature only if he would obey the law of God, and, vice versa, if he would live in accord with his own nature, he would obey the law of God. True, God did communicate to man over and above what was embedded in his very nature the specific commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But this was only to force an immediate and final test as to whether man would really live in accordance with the law of God as everywhere revealed within and about him.<sup>23</sup>

When man fell it was therefore his attempt to do without God in every respect. Man sought his ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty somewhere beyond God, either directly within himself or in the universe about him. God had interpreted the universe for him, or we may say man had interpreted the universe under the direction of God, but now he sought to interpret the universe without reference to God; we mean of course without reference to the kind of God defined above.

The result for man was that he made for himself *a false ideal of knowledge*. Man made for himself the ideal of absolute comprehension in knowledge.<sup>24</sup> This he could never have done if he had continued to recognize that he was a creature. It is totally inconsistent with the idea of creatureliness that man should strive for comprehensive knowledge; if it could be attained, it would wipe God out of existence; man would then be God.

22. Van Til has in mind here the Westminster Confession of Faith, 4.2: "After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures."

23. See Romans 1:32; 2:14ff.

24. Van Til is referring to the fact that the first temptation and subsequent sin had embedded within it a desire to be like God with respect to knowledge: "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen. 3:4-5).

And, as we shall see later, because man sought for this unattainable ideal, he brought upon himself no end of woe.

In conjunction with man's false ideal of knowledge, we may mention here the fact that when man saw he could not attain his own false ideal of knowledge, he blamed this on his finite character. *Man confused finitude with sin*. Thus he commingled the metaphysical and the ethical aspects of reality.<sup>25</sup> Not willing to take the blame for sin, man laid it to circumstances round about him or within him.

### 3. THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

When we have discussed the doctrine of God and the doctrine of man, we have the two points between which the knowledge transaction takes place. Yet since sin has come into the world, we cannot see the whole of the picture of reality from the Christian point of view until we see how God and man are brought together after their separation. Reconciliation is possible only if God brings about salvation for man and therewith reunion with himself. Christ came to bring man back to God.

To do this he was and had to be truly God. For this reason the church has emphasized the fact that Christ was "Very God of Very God." Here it appears how important it is that we first think of the ontological Trinity before we think of the economical Trinity. It was the second person of the ontological Trinity, who was, in respect of his essence, fully equal with the Father, who therefore existed from all eternity with the Father, who in the incarnation assumed a human nature.

This does not mean that he laid aside his divine nature or that he became a human person. Nor does it mean that he became a divine-human person. Nor does it mean that the divine and human natures were intermingled. Christ was and remained even when he was in the manger in Bethlehem a divine person, but this divine person took to itself in close union with its divine nature a human nature. The Creed of Chalcedon<sup>26</sup> has expressed all this by saying that in Christ the divine

25. The reference here is to the fact that, instead of admitting personal rebellion against God, Adam attempted to blame his (and Eve, her) circumstance: "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.' Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate'" (Gen. 3:12–13). The reason this is a "commingling" of the metaphysical and ethical is that Adam and Eve laid blame on their condition as finite creatures (metaphysical), instead of their rebellion against God (ethical).

26. This creed was prepared by over five hundred church leaders at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. It sought to respond to errant interpretations of the person of Christ, such as Nestorianism, which affirmed two persons in the incarnate Christ, and Eutychianism, which affirmed only one nature, constituted by a pre-incarnate mingling of the divine and the human.

and the human natures are so related as to be “two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.” The former two adjectives safeguard against the idea that the divine and the human are in any sense intermingled; the latter two adjectives assert the full reality of the union.

It will be noted at this point that this view of the incarnation is in full accord with the doctrine of God as above set forth. If Christ is really the second person of the ontological Trinity, he shares in the incommunicable attributes of the Godhead. Accordingly, this implies that even in the incarnation Christ could not commingle the eternal and the temporal. The eternal must always remain independent of and prior to the temporal.

In addition to this brief statement about the person of Christ we must say a word about his offices.

Christ is true prophet, priest, and king.<sup>27</sup> The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “How does Christ execute the office of a Prophet?” The answer is, “Christ executeth the office of a Prophet, in revealing to us by his Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.”<sup>28</sup> Now if we recall that man set for himself a false ideal of knowledge when he became a sinner, that is, he lost true wisdom, we may say that in Christ man was re-instated to true knowledge. In Christ man realizes that he is a creature of God and that he cannot seek for comprehensive knowledge. Christ is our wisdom.<sup>29</sup> He is our wisdom not only in the sense that he tells us how to get to heaven; he is our wisdom too in teaching us true knowledge about everything concerning which we should have knowledge.

Again the catechism asks: “How does Christ execute the office of a Priest?” The answer is: “Christ executeth the office of a Priest, in his once offering up himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.”<sup>30</sup> We need not discuss this point except to indicate that Christ’s work as priest cannot be separated from his work as prophet. Christ could not give us true knowledge of God and of the universe unless he *died* for us as priest. The question of knowledge is an ethical question at the root. It is indeed possible to have theoretically correct knowledge about God without loving God. The devil illustrates this point. Yet what is meant by knowing God

27. This understanding of Christ’s threefold mediatorial office is fairly distinctive to Reformed theology and is first elaborated in Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.25. For more on the history of this idea, see Louis Berkhof and Dick Oostenink, *Systematic Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 356ff.

28. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 24.

29. 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30.

30. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 25.

in Scripture is *knowing and loving* God: this is *true* knowledge of God: the other is *false*.<sup>31</sup>

In the third place the catechism asks, “How does Christ execute the office of a King?” The answer is, “Christ executeth the office of a King, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all of his and our enemies.”<sup>32</sup> Again we observe that this work of Christ as king must be brought into organic connection with his work as prophet and priest. To give us true wisdom or knowledge Christ must *subdue* us. He died for us to subdue us and thus gave us wisdom. It is only by emphasizing this organic connection of the aspects of the work of Christ that we can avoid all mechanical separation of the intellectual and the moral aspects of the question of knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

We have laid stress upon the organic relation between the offices of Christ. We must now point out that the same organic relationship exists between what Christ did *for* us and what Christ did and does *within* us. In soteriology we deal with the application to us of the redemption Christ has wrought *for* us. Sin being what it is, it would be useless to have salvation lie ready at hand unless it were also applied to us. Inasmuch as we are

31. There is perhaps no greater controversy surrounding Van Til's thought than the question of knowledge. These qualifications, then, become important in discussions of his epistemology and apologetic. Without doing justice to the entire debate, we should note the following: (1) Van Til sees the question of knowledge as “an ethical question at the root.” It is such because included in it is one's relationship to God. It is not simply, therefore, that one can have true knowledge if one assents to a particular true proposition. The *context* of that assent is as important as the assent itself. This is an apologetic point that is often overlooked, especially in philosophical discussions of knowledge. (2) Van Til *does* admit that it is possible, and he would even say it is the case, that one can have theoretically correct knowledge about God, or anything else, without loving God. However, because “knowledge is an ethical question at the root” theoretical knowledge falls far short of what it means, biblically, to *know* God (and by implication to know anything else). (3) When Van Til says, “What is meant by knowing God in Scripture . . .,” he does not mean to say that the *only* way Scripture uses “knowledge of God” includes “knowing and loving” God. Van Til says in numerous places that unbelievers know God truly. He means to say only that knowledge *in its fullest sense* in Scripture includes loving God as well. (4) The last clause, “the other [knowledge] is *false*,” is, admittedly, a confusing way to speak. False knowledge can be a difficult thing to grasp. However, if one sees knowledge “as an ethical question at the root,” then “false knowledge” would be knowledge that is theoretically correct—that is, it assents to a true proposition and ascribes the right properties to a given thing—but it is false in that the *context* for such is rebellion against God, who not only gives the knowledge but alone can provide for us an accurate account of it.

32. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 26.

33. Note the connection, again, of the intellectual and moral aspects of knowledge, which are not to be separated, according to Van Til.

dead in trespasses and sins,<sup>34</sup> it would do us no good to have a wonderful life-giving potion laid next to us in our coffin. It would do us good only if someone actually administered the potion to us.<sup>35</sup>

This point is already involved in the fact that Christ must subdue us in order to give us knowledge. But this subduing of us by Christ is done through his Spirit. It is the Spirit who takes the things of Christ and gives them unto us. If Christ is to do his own work, the Spirit must do his. For that reason Christ told the disciples it would profit them if he should ascend to heaven.<sup>36</sup> It would only be after his ascent that the Spirit could come and finish the work that Christ had begun to do while on earth. What Christ did while he was on earth is only a beginning of his work.

For this reason we must observe at this juncture that the Spirit who applies the work of Christ is himself also a member of the ontological Trinity. He would have to be. Unless he were, the work of salvation would not be the work of God alone. If God was to be maintained in his incommunicable attributes, the Spirit of God, not man, had to effect the salvation of man.<sup>37</sup> The only alternative to this would be that man could at some point take the initiative in the matter of his own salvation. This would imply that the salvation wrought by Christ could be frustrated by man. Suppose that none should accept the salvation offered to them. In that case the whole of Christ's work would be in vain, and the eternal God would be set at naught by temporal man. Even if we say that in the case of any one individual sinner the question of salvation is in the last analysis dependent upon man rather than upon God, that is, if we say that man can of himself accept or reject the gospel as he pleases, we have made the eternal God dependent upon man. We have then, in effect, denied the incommunicable attributes of God. If we refuse to mix the eternal and the temporal at the point of creation and at the point of the incarnation, we must also refuse to mix them at the point of salvation.

It will be noted that the point discussed in the preceding paragraph is the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism. It may be asked whether we should not in apologetics ignore the difference that exists between different theological schools and defend the "common faith."

34. Ephesians 2:1.

35. The Reformed emphasis in salvation is that it is a monergistic work. That is, it is a work of God *alone*. It is such because we are *dead*, not simply sick or otherwise handicapped, in our sins. We need, therefore, not medicine but resurrection.

36. John 16:7.

37. The reason Van Til says, "If God were to be maintained in his incommunicable attributes . . ." is that unless salvation is from God alone, he is in some way *dependent* on us. Thus, his aseity, and all attributes entailed by aseity, disappear.

From what we have said above, however, it ought to appear that we cannot take this attitude. The difference between Calvinism and Arminianism is a difference in the conception of the relation of the eternal God and temporal man. Now since we hold that only such a concept of God as holds without compromise at any point to the conception of God as absolutely independent of man can really be said to represent the consistently Christian position, and since the whole debate between the Christian and the non-Christian positions revolves about the question of the relation of the eternal to the temporal or of God to man, it will be apparent that we must hold that Arminianism can offer no effective apologetic for Christianity. It is up to the Arminian to show, if he can, that his view offers a better apologetic for Christianity than that offered by the Calvinist. Certain it is that the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism cannot be ignored. He who tries to ignore it has in effect already taken the Arminian position. We shall not make much progress against the common enemy if we ignore such differences between ourselves. A Calvinist naturally thinks that the Arminian is letting the enemy into the fort in spite of what he thinks he is doing; on the other hand an Arminian thinks that the Calvinist is letting the enemy into the fort without knowing it.<sup>38</sup>

## 5. THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

“The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” Such is the Westminster Confession’s definition of the church.<sup>39</sup> This definition contains the same conception of the relation of the eternal to the temporal as is manifest in the doctrine of salvation. In the last analysis, it is the eternal that precedes the temporal; it is God who determines the salvation of man; the church, that is, the invisible church, is the “whole number of the elect.” This does not preclude human responsibility. The confession has spoken of man’s responsibility and “free will” in preceding articles.<sup>40</sup> It only brings out clearly that God is absolute, here as elsewhere.

It is this fact of God’s absoluteness as expressed in his election of men that gives us courage in preaching and in reasoning with men. Sin being what it is, we may be certain that all our preaching and all our reasoning

38. We should note again that one’s apologetic, in Van Til’s mind, is directly related to and dependent on one’s theology.

39. Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.1.

40. See Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 9.

with men will be in vain unless God brings men to bay. Men cannot be brought to bay if they have any place to which they can go. And they do have a place to which they can go if they have the inherent ability to accept or reject the gospel, in which case they need not feel uneasy about rejecting it today, because they can accept it tomorrow.<sup>41</sup>

## 6. THE DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS<sup>42</sup>

When we come to the Christian conception of the “last things,” we see once more how diametrically the Christian position is set over against that of its opponents. It becomes especially plain here that in the Christian conception of things interpretation precedes facts. Every Christian who trusts his future to God believes that God controls the future. He believes that God has interpreted the future; he believes that the future will come to pass as God has planned it. Prophecy illustrates this point. Belief in the promises of God with respect to our eternal salvation is meaningless if God does not control the future. We look forward to the facts to come because we accept the interpretation of them given us by God.

Here too we see again that we cannot separate man from the universe around him. Christ spoke of the “regeneration of all things”<sup>43</sup> when he spoke of the end of the world. The promises for the future include a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness shall dwell.<sup>44</sup> This righteousness includes the fact that the wolf and the lamb shall feed together and that the animal will do man no harm.<sup>45</sup> We interpret nature only by the light of the interpretation of God. Then too the time when all this will happen is exclusively in God’s hand. If we seek to interpret the “signs of the times” we are to seek to interpret them as God has already interpreted them. We interpret history only by the light of the interpretation of God. The Christian philosophy of nature and the Christian philosophy of history are the diametrical opposites of the non-Christian philosophy of nature and the non-Christian philosophy of history.<sup>46</sup>

41. That is, if salvation is ultimately “up to us,” then we may not sense the urgency of the call of the gospel. We can dismiss it now, and maybe accept it later. But if it is given by God alone, then, when the Spirit uses the preaching of that gospel to convict us, we will cry out to God, who alone can save us.

42. Sometimes referred to as eschatology.

43. Matthew 19:28.

44. 2 Peter 3:13.

45. Isaiah 11:6f.

46. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (syllabus).

In this first chapter we have only a very broad and general statement of what we are going to vindicate as being the truth of God. But even in this broad survey it is shown first that it is the Reformed Faith, not some common denominator “core” of Christianity, that must be defended. By the “Christian philosophy of life” I mean the truths of Scripture as set forth by the classical Reformed theologians under the *loci* enumerated.<sup>47</sup>

It is shown (a) that the doctrine of God is not taken from a natural theology worked up from “experience” or “reason” apart from Scripture,<sup>48</sup> (b) that it therefore includes all the attributes of God, his personality, and his Trinity,<sup>49</sup> and (c) that it is self-consciously set in opposition to all forms of non-Christian thought which compromise or deny the self-contained character by thinking of him (or it) as correlative to the universe.<sup>50</sup> It is clear that my philosophy of history is based upon the idea of the counsel or plan of God. It is not the knowledge of God that produces the facts of the created universe; it is rather the will of God, as carrying out the plan of God.<sup>51</sup> I hold God’s counsel or will to be carried out by means of his work of creation and providence.<sup>52</sup> I hold the work of Christ to

47. In spite of this, Masselink asserts: “Both Van Til and Patton fail to stress in apologetics what is distinctively Reformed.” “These definitions of Patton and Van Til are entirely colorless and not specifically Reformed according to my judgment. What both have said can be applied to Arminian Apologetics as well as to Calvinistic Apologetics, because the Arminians are also ‘Christian.’” William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 176.

48. The fact that I speak of the “Christian philosophy of life” does not, therefore, prove, as Masselink contends, an “extreme emphasis upon philosophy in my whole system.” *Ibid.*

49. The charge of Daane that the structure of my thought springs from a nonbiblical, antibiblical dialecticism of nonbeing and being appears to be as far from the actual state of affairs as it is possible to be. The simple statement of the series of Reformed doctrines given above, underlying as it does all my thought, would be abhorrent to any “Hegelian rationalist” or “modern existentialist.”

50. The charge that I have any tendency toward idealistic philosophy, with its idea of God as at best correlative to the universe, also appears to be unfounded. The whole structure of the chapter from which I have quoted is self-consciously and at well-nigh every point directed at all forms of correlativism or pantheism.

51. This is an oft-repeated emphasis, clearly discernible in all I have written. There was no need for my critics to overlook this. True, if the knowledge of God, not based on the plan of God, were constitutive of the facts of the universe, then these facts would also be constitutive of the knowledge of God. But the very structure of my view of God as self-contained and of the counsel of God basic to the knowledge of God precludes the idea of any such correlativity.

52. This ought to satisfy Mr. Van Halsema and others who seem to be concerned lest I make the existence of the facts of the universe to depend upon the interpretative activity of man. The things of this universe come into existence by the

be the means for the realization of the “regeneration of all things,” through his body, the church, and not merely the instrument of salvation for individual men.

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creation of God and are maintained in their existence by the providence of God. This includes man himself. How then could man’s thoughts in any wise control either the existence or the maintenance of the facts of the universe? And Daane’s assertion that I cannot recognize the reality of the doctrine of creation (James Daane, *A Theology of Grace: An Inquiry into and Evaluation of Dr. C. Van Til’s Doctrine of Common Grace* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 118 n.) is shown to be contrary to fact by the basic position assigned to this doctrine in this chapter.