

PARADOX AND TRUTH

RETHINKING VAN TIL ON THE TRINITY BY
COMPARING VAN TIL, PLANTINGA, AND KUYPER

Ralph A. Smith

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This book is dedicated to Frank, a Christian businessman who has generously and faithfully supported the ministry of our research center for over ten years. Frank's kindness is all the more remarkable in that he does not entirely agree with our theological position. On the doctrine of the Trinity and its importance for the Christian life, however, I am sure he fully concurs. Without his support this book would hardly have been possible.

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Introduction

Cornelius Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity has been variously viewed. On the one hand, some have misconstrued it as heretical or attacked it as rash and dangerous. On the other hand, a not insignificant group of theologians and Christian writers has found Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity to be a fruitful source for serious work to develop a truly Christian worldview. The contrast between the two groups' evaluation of Van Til could not be greater. Evaluating Van Til is something of a theological problem, which has now become further complicated by recent studies of the doctrine of the Trinity critical of Augustine's formulation—the foundation of Van Til's approach. A Reformed representative of those critical of Augustine is Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.¹ who offers, in the place of the traditional statements of the doctrine, a social view of the Trinity.

This recent study of the Trinity invites reconsideration of Van Til's view. Does Plantinga's social view of the Trinity and recent critique of Augustine require a revision of Van Til's approach? What about Van Til's use of nontraditional language? Is it legitimate or is it a "novelty" that causes confusion? What are the worldview implications of Van Til's view of the Trinity and does Plantinga's view significantly alter these? To consider these and

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (no. 1, April 1988): 38. Hereafter referred to as "TOPT."

similar questions, we introduce and evaluate Cornelius Plantinga's social view of the Trinity, briefly explain and attempt to defend certain aspects of Van Til's view, comparing it with Plantinga's, and, finally, suggest a revision of Van Til's view that sets the doctrine of the Trinity more clearly at the center of systematic and biblical theology and the Christian worldview. It is my purpose to help bring Van Til's profound exposition of the Trinity back into the discussion of this doctrine and, in that connection, to help stimulate further consideration of the worldview implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

THE RELATIVE NEGLECT OF VAN TIL

One reason for this paper is the relative neglect of Van Til by evangelicals. Considering the literature produced by his followers, one would think that even theologians who did not favor Van Til's views would have much to say about him, but this is not the case. Evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz, for example, who has recently written a systematic theology centered in the doctrine of the Trinity,² writes as if not only Van Til but even John Calvin—who provided the most sententious discussion of the Trinity in the entire Reformation era³—did not exist. Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jurgen Moltmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg⁴ are, for Grenz, the twentieth century theologians who have made contributions which deserve our attention, not Van Til. The leading evangelical theologian of the second half of the century, Carl F. H. Henry, writing in 1982, when Van Tillians were in the process of publishing a rapidly growing body of literature

² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994). Grenz is an exception to the evangelical trend to neglect the Trinity, but by ignoring Calvin and Van Til, he has limited his ability to apply it broadly.

³ See the famous essay by B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in his *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956).

⁴ Grenz studied under Pannenberg.

which related the Trinity to academic and everyday life, went so far as to say:

Louis Berkhof, Cornelius Van Til, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., Gordon H. Clark, and Samuel Mikolaski support the orthodox view in their theological writings. But American evangelical theology has not on the whole contributed significant literature to the current revival of trinitarian interest.⁵

Was Henry ignorant of the fact that Van Til taught the doctrine of the Trinity as the biblical solution to the problem of the one and the many and therefore as relevant to every academic or philosophical problem? What could be more significant than a view of the Trinity which places the doctrine not only in the center of the entire theological enterprise, but also every academic and practical discipline, a view of the Trinity which sets forth the triune God as the very heart of the entire Christian worldview?

Van Til may or may not have succeeded, but he attempted nothing less. His view deserves attention, and those who decide that he did not succeed have the opportunity to take up the challenge to offer a better approach. For whether or not Van Til was correct in the way he expounded the doctrine of the Trinity and its place in the Christian worldview, can any Christian doubt that God Himself, as the triune Creator, Redeemer, and Lord of all, must be the foundation, the center, and the aim of all Christian thought?

⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, "God Who Stands and Stays, Part One," *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 5:212.

THE EVANGELICAL WORLDVIEW AND THE TRINITY

Contrary to what one might expect, among evangelical Christians the doctrine of the Trinity seems not to be considered an important part of the Christian worldview—if, that is, we are to judge their faith by the place the doctrine of the Trinity holds in published studies of the Christian worldview. A brief survey of some of the major evangelical writers suggests that the Trinity is secondary at best. Francis Schaeffer, a student of Van Til and the evangelical writer who popularized the idea of the “Christian worldview,” did give attention to the Trinity,⁶ but unlike Van Til, Schaeffer did not make the doctrine of the Trinity a central concern. Other evangelical writers on the Christian worldview, though following Schaeffer in their concern to relate and contrast Christianity with other religions and philosophies in the broad strokes of a worldview approach, either did not catch Schaeffer’s emphasis on the Trinity or decided not to follow it.

To cite only a few examples, James W. Sire’s otherwise excellent book *The Universe Next Door* mentions the doctrine of the Trinity in passing, but the doctrine plays no important part at all in his discussion, apart from a brief mention in which Sire emphasizes that the Trinity demonstrates the Christian worldview is personal.⁷ Ronald H. Nash’s reference to the Trinity is no doubt intended to communicate to the reader that he considers it essential to the Christian position, but once mentioned, the doctrine of the Trinity is no longer important in the argument.⁸ Nash’s “touchstone proposition”—the proposition that expresses

⁶ For example, Schaeffer writes, “Every once and a while in my discussions someone asks how I can believe in the Trinity. My answer is always the same. I would still be an agnostic if there were no Trinity, because there would be no answers. Without the high order of personal unity and diversity as given in the Trinity, there are no answers” (*He Is There and He Is Not Silent* [Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1972], 14).

⁷ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1976), 24–25.

⁸ Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 35.

the fundamental truth of reality in his worldview—is: “Human beings and the universe in which they reside are the creation of the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture.”⁹ Now the God of the Bible is certainly the triune God. But if the fact of God’s trinity is essential to our worldview, that fact needs to be demonstrated and then expounded so that Christians can see what the doctrine of the Trinity means for Christian thought and life. Nash makes no attempt to do this. Neither does R. C. Sproul in his *Lifeyes: Understanding the Ideas that Shape Society Today*.

The list of evangelical authors who either ignore the doctrine of the Trinity or treat it only in passing could be extended.¹⁰ Thus, what Karl Rahner wrote of Catholics applies almost equally to evangelicals:

We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.¹¹

The words of Jurgen Moltmann are also appropriate:

Why are most Christians in the West, whether they be Catholics or Protestants, really only ‘monotheists’ where the experience and practice of their faith is concerned? Whether God is one or triune evidently makes as little difference to the doctrine of faith as it does to ethics. Consequently the doctrine of the Trinity hardly occurs at all in modern apologetic writings which aim to bring the Christian faith home to the modern world again. Even new approaches made by fundamental theology do not begin with the Trinity.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Even Gary DeMar, a Van Tillian, does not do justice to the centrality of the Trinity in what is one of the best short introductions to the Christian worldview, *War of the Worldviews: A Christian Defense Manual* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1994).

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, with new introduction by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1970; reprint, New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10–11.

¹² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 1. Moltmann, of course, had a different audience in mind.

Van Til stands in utter contrast to this tendency. He has not only asserted that the doctrine of the Trinity is important, but has also shown how it relates to other academic disciplines and to the history of theological and philosophical thought. He challenges both traditional thinking about the problem of the one and the many and traditional logic. His view that the Bible itself must be the standard for all human thought is a correlate of his view of the Trinity. Finally, Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity is grounded in the Christian doctrine of worship as well as the doctrine of salvation. With slight revision, Van Til's approach to the doctrine of the Trinity promises to advance the whole idea of distinctly Christian thought.