

ANTITHESIS REVISITED: THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF
'ANTITHESIS' IN VAN TILLIAN PRESUPPOSITIONALISM

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature and development of the notion of 'antithesis' in the thought of Cornelius Van Til and subsequently within the branch of apologetics commonly referred to as "Van Tillian presuppositionalism." After noting the influences of Abraham Kuyper and J. Gresham Machen upon Van Til's thought, we will survey the distinctive ways in which Van Til and Van Tillians defined the notion of antithesis as well as its place in apologetics. In close, I will make some brief comments suggesting that antithesis be seen as an ontological discordancy.

The Christian faith has had a robust history of apologetics, though certainly there have been periods of greater development within this field in some centuries more than in others. For those of us here today interested in the subject of apologetics, we are fortunate to be living in a veritable renaissance in the subject. The last fifty years or so has seen a tremendous proliferation in the field. "Arguably the most controversial apologist of the twentieth century was Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987)..."¹ Concerning the influence of Van Til in the field of apologetics it really is hard to overstate his legacy, but his influence has been "both strategic and controversial."² In the words of E.R. Geehan, "Van Til's writings, with their depth and logical rigor as well as prophetic urgency, have not won him many allies. In this ecumenical age he is disturbingly but intentionally out of place."³ Despite the controversy surrounding his teaching and ministry, there are those who believe he may be

¹ Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 240.

² E.R. Geehan, *Jerusalem and Athens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), vii.

³ *Ibid.*, vii.

"the most important Christian thinker of the twentieth century."⁴ Though he was technically trained in idealist philosophy, taking his PhD in this subject from Princeton University, most of his writings were in the fields of theology and apologetics. "From the outset of his teaching career, Van Til started to develop a distinctively consistent Christian philosophical outlook. He wanted to see everything in terms of the biblical world-and-life view."⁵ He was well known for a number of emphases, not the least of which include the rational-irrational dialectic, the need to maintain the Creator-creature distinction, stressing the need for a transcendental method of argumentation (as well as the need to presuppose the ontological Trinity in all things), and appealing to the authority of the "self-attesting Christ of Scripture." While each of these plays a significant role in his thought, "...Van Til should be understood as a theologian of 'antithesis' . . ."⁶ As John Frame has put it, ". . . Van Til is . . . a kind of apostle of antithesis."⁷ He was not the first, however, to stress the need for thinking in "antithetical terms."

Abraham Kuyper

Before we examine how Van Til articulated his own view of antithesis, it is important to note the influence of two particular individuals who impacted his thinking: Abraham Kuyper and J. Gresham Machen. We will address each man's influence upon Van Til in turn.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was . . .

an incredibly brilliant and productive Christian leader, who founded the Free University of Amsterdam, edited a daily newspaper, led a Christian political party (serving briefly as prime minister of the Netherlands), all the while teaching a vivid and rigorous

⁴ John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 3. Hereafter, *CVT*.

⁵ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 11. Hereafter, *VTA*.

⁶ *CVT*, 353.

⁷ *CVT*, 188.

Reformed theology creatively applied to the many disciplines usually considered "secular." His great message was: Christ is Lord over all areas of human life; every thought and every discipline must be brought captive to his rule.⁸

As someone who grew up in the Netherlands before immigrating to the United States at the age of ten, no doubt Van Til would have heard many laudable things about the influence of Kuyper both in terms of his Reformed theological insights, but also as one who had a prominent impact on his motherland. Kuyper was an impressive figure who "devoted much thought both to antithesis and to common grace. Indeed, he also devoted much action to the application of these concepts in the church and society."⁹ Out of a desire to see God glorified in all things, "Kuyper himself urged that all human thought be governed by a Christian worldview derived from Scripture. To Kuyper, this worldview was antithetical to every secular ideology, whether that be philosophical, theological, political, economic, aesthetic, or whatever. Some of Kuyper's disciples sought to bring that Christian worldview to bear on politics, some on education, some on journalism, and so on."¹⁰ As Kuyper maintained that all things should be brought under the rule of Christ, he stressed that there is "an abyss in the universal human consciousness across which no bridge can be built."¹¹ This "abyss" is insurmountable and something with which to be reckoned.

Two explanatory comments linking Kuyper and the antithesis should be considered at this point, one by Dennis E. Johnson and the other by Greg Bahnsen. Johnson states:

⁸ CVT, 3.

⁹ John Frame, "Van Til on Antithesis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 81. Cf. Brian Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 152. He contends that "Van Til had sought a new grounding for apologetics in the Dutch Reformed approach of Abraham Kuyper, whose Calvinism emphasized faith and left no room for common ground between believer and nonbeliever." This is, in all likelihood, overstating the case. The issue was not that there was no common ground, but *what* the common ground *actually was* and what it could produce.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 152; 1898 reprint by Grand Rapids: Erdmanns, 1968.

Kuyper spoke of a sharp "conflict of principles" between "those who cling to the confession of the Triune God and His Word, and those who seek a solution of the world-problem in Deism, Pantheism and Naturalism."¹² Adherence to these two conflicting worldviews "are not relative opponents, walking together halfway, and, further on, peaceably suffering one another to choose different paths, but they are both in earnest, disputing with one another *the whole domain of life*, and they cannot desist from the constant endeavor to pull down to the ground *the entire edifice* of their respective controverted assertions, all the supports included, upon which their assertions rest..."¹³ The non-Christian worldview and the Christian worldview "Are two absolutely different starting points, which have nothing in common in their origin. Parallel lines never intersect. You have to choose either the one or the other."¹⁴

Greg Bahnsen contends that "Kuyper's distinctive and masterful insight into apologetics, was that the two conflicting principles that are at work in the believer and unbeliever — submission to God versus autonomy — produce two opposing theories of knowledge (two "sciences")."¹⁵ The emphasis on two conflicting principles is important. Bahnsen explains:

He recognized the significance of the alienation of the natural man from God, in contrast to the regenerating and enlightening work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Kuyper maintained that there is an antithesis between belief and unbelief, exhibited in their different orientations of heart and different lifestyles. The regenerate and unregenerate minds have different conceptions of "science"; they are committed to two different types of knowing.¹⁶

It seems that Kuyper's influence on Van Til is apparent. At one point Edward Clowney, one of the Van Til's students spoke about the influence of Kuyper on his former professor, stating, "Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck taught him that the *idea* of Scripture must never be separated from its *message*. [That is,] an inadequate view of God's sovereign grace leads to an inadequate view of God's sovereign word."¹⁷ Although the undoubted influence

¹² Here Johnson quotes Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 130-131.

¹³ He cites the same book here as well, 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 134. Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace and Practical Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2002): 74.

¹⁵ *VTA*, 598.

¹⁶ *VTA*, 598.

¹⁷ Edward Clowney, "Preaching the Word of the Lord: Cornelius Van Til, V.D.M.," Appendix B in *CVT*, 431.

of Kuyper upon Van Til was significant, it was not pervasive. ". . . Kuyper . . . exercised a formative influence on the thinking of Van Til as he sought a rigorously consistent, Reformed understanding of apologetics. But they did not see eye to eye on every point, and on the subject of apologetics their disagreement was readily apparent."¹⁸ As a matter of fact, Kuyper saw little to no use for apologetics (see footnote 18 below). Van Til obviously saw much value and need for it.

J. Gresham Machen

In addition to the profound influence of Kuyper upon Van Til, especially in terms of “antithetical and worldview thinking,” another impacting figure upon him was J. Gresham Machen. It was Machen who successfully brought Van Til to his newly founded seminary in 1929, Westminster Theological Seminary. The two shared a conviction to uphold orthodoxy at all cost. Frame notes that “most everything Van Til wrote and taught reflected the Machen themes: Christian orthodoxy is indispensable to a Christian profession; there is a great gulf, *a religious antithesis* between orthodox Christianity and its liberal opponents.”¹⁹

In the first half of the twentieth century, liberal scholars increasingly began to replace conservative and moderate scholars among faculties at major universities and seminaries.

¹⁸ VTA, 596. Bahnsen illustrates that “Kuyper’s profound insight into the antithesis between the regenerated and the unregenerated mind was somewhat undercut, however, by two other ideas. First, he believed that some of man’s abilities to deal with external matters (for example, weighing, measuring, and using logic) are not affected by his depravity. Second, he interpreted common grace in such a way that there is a limited area of neutral common ground where the regenerate and the unregenerate meet on equal terms and arrive at common interpretations of the facts. But since human depravity is comprehensive (‘total’), and the antithesis between depravity and regeneration is radical (going to the root of life and death), it is hard to see how Kuyper could allow for such exceptions. The mistaken inference that Kuyper drew from his correct principle [namely that there are two conflicting principles that work in the believer and unbeliever] was that, given the antithesis between belief and unbelief and the resulting two sciences, apologetics aimed at the unbeliever is virtually useless and deserves only a narrow place in the theological curriculum. There is little use or justification for reasoning with an unbeliever [So Kuyper thought], since he has a depraved understanding of reasoning itself; meaningful communication between belief and unbelief is not naturally going to occur” (599).

¹⁹ CVT, 23 (emphasis added).

Machen saw what was happening within the PCUSA, Princeton (et. Al), and he stated in no uncertain terms that appeasement with liberalism was nothing short of Christian infidelity.

Machen's fundamental reformational insight was that orthodox Christianity and theological liberalism are not two different Christian theological positions, as are Calvinism and Lutheranism, but rather are two different religions, radically opposed to one another.²⁰

With respect to Machen's central conviction, here is the crux of the matter: "For Machen, liberalism was not Christian at all, but was fundamentally opposed to Christianity as Christianity is defined in Scripture and history. Machen saw their relationship as an 'antithesis.' They cannot be synthesized; we can only choose one or the other."²¹ Frame suggests that

Van Til (with more than a nod to Kuyper) applied Machen's 'antithetical' thinking to neo-orthodoxy and other theological movements. Indeed, in some respects Van Til's entire apologetic may be seen as a rethinking of the nature and implications of 'antithesis.' Like Machen's liberals, Van Til's 'natural man' is an apostate. He knows the truth, but rebels against it and directly opposes it. Van Til applied the concept of antithesis not only to belief in general and to the more recent variations of liberal theology, but also to the historic divisions within the Christian church. [According to Van Til, t]he problem with Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Arminianism, and even 'less-consistent Calvinism,' is that they compromise with unbelief, understood as the antithesis to true Christianity.²²

Stressing just how important the notion of antithesis was in the thought of Van Til,

²⁰ Ibid., 41. See further, John M. Frame, "Antithesis and the Doctrine of Scripture," an online article, accessed August 2, 2016 at <www.frame-poythress.org>. Here Frame points out that ". . . in 1924, in his great book *Christianity and Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen evaluated the situation very differently: 'In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is the time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called 'modernism' or 'liberalism.'" (*Christianity and Liberalism*, 1923) In Machen's view, liberalism was not a faction or party within Christianity, a position along the Christian 'spectrum.' It was a different religion entirely. In his book, Machen shows that the two religions hold exact opposite positions on everything of importance: doctrine, God, man, the Bible, Christ, salvation, and the church. Machen's approach is antithetic. Liberalism is by its very nature non-Christian, unbelieving. We may extrapolate that on this view liberalism is also foolish, not wise, wicked, not righteous, in darkness, not light, worldly, not churchly. Machen's antithetic evaluation of liberalism led him eventually to leave Princeton seminary and later the Presbyterian Church, USA, to found new institutions that would maintain the biblical gospel against unbelief."

²¹ CVT, 41.

²² Ibid., 42.

Greg Bahnsen writes, "Anyone who is familiar with the corpus of Van Til's publications and writings will recognize that the subject of antithesis is one fitting hallmark of his scholarly contribution to twentieth-century apologetical theory."²³ Accentuating just how central the feature of antithesis was in his thought, Bahnsen continues:

It was in the interest of antithesis that Van Til wrote his first major classroom syllabus, now entitled *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, stating that, 'It is necessary to become clearly aware of the deep antithesis between the two main types of epistemology,' Christian and non-Christian. It was in the interest of antithesis that Van Til published his first major book on the 'Crisis Theology' of Barth and Brunner, entitled *The New Modernism*, hoping to alert the Christian church to the fact that Barth's dialectical theology was fundamentally one with modernistic theology – and that 'the new modernism and the old alike are destructive of historic Christian theism and with it of the significant meaning of human experience.'²⁴

Cornelius Van Til

In his own words, what did Van Til claim about the nature of antithesis and how did that notion evolve and expand in his writings? Due to the sheer number of his works and my limited time, only a couple of his more prominent works will be cited.

In *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til stressed what he called the "absolute ethical antithesis." He writes, ". . . We must begin by emphasizing the absolute ethical antithesis in which the 'natural man' stands to God. This implies that he knows nothing truly as he ought to know it. It means, therefore, that the 'natural man' not only is basically mistaken in his notions about religion and God, but is as basically mistaken in his notions about the atoms and the laws of gravitation."²⁵ Notice his emphasis upon the "natural man,"

²³ Bahnsen, "At War with the Word: The Necessity of Biblical Antithesis." This unpublished address was delivered by Dr. Bahnsen in the 1987 Van Til Lectures at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. Accessed June 2, 2016 at http://www.reformed.org/apologetics/index.html?mainframe=/apologetics/At_War_With_the_Word.html

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2nd Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 64. Hereafter, *IST*.

clearly a reference to the Apostle Paul's designation for the unregenerate human state (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). He elaborates on the destitute state of such a being: "From this ultimate point of view the 'natural man' knows nothing truly. He has chains about his neck and sees shadows only. It is this point on which many theologians are vague. They maintain, to be sure, that the natural man cannot truly know God, but they will not maintain that the natural man cannot truly know the flowers of the field . . . All knowledge is interrelated."²⁶

With significant pushback on Van Til's notion of an "*absolute* ethical antithesis," William Masselink expressed great concern. He believed that "[i]f there is an absolute ethical antithesis between God and man all functions of human conscience become impossible."²⁷ In *Common Grace and Christian Education*, Masselink states emphatically:

Our great difficulty with Van Til's philosophy of common grace is his premise or starting point, namely, the absolute ethical antithesis between God and man. This premise controls his whole system of thinking. All of the objections which follow are immediately related to this primary premise, which Van Til himself declares is his starting point. . . . All Reformed theology, of course, asserts that there is an ethical antithesis between God and fallen man. The question is whether it is *absolute*. According to Webster's dictionary the term *absolute* means without qualification, limitation or restriction. The question is whether the term *absolute* is not too sweeping and far-reaching here.²⁸

Clearly Masselink believes Van Til had gone too far, undermining any real or significant connection between believers and unbelievers. With a desire to make sure the distinction between "total depravity" and "absolute depravity" is upheld, Masselink writes, "Reformed theology distinguishes between *total* and *absolute* depravity. By total depravity we mean that human depravity extends to every function of the soul, intellect, will and emotions . . .

²⁶ Ibid., 64.

²⁷ William Masselink, *Common Grace and Christian Education: Or, A Calvinistic Philosophy of Science*, mimeographed (Westminster Theological Seminary: Montgomery Library, 1951), 75.

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

By *absolute* depravity we mean that man is as bad as he can be. With absolute depravity there can no longer be any curbing of sin through Common Grace . . .”²⁹ In Masselink’s view, to say that an “absolute antithesis” exists is tantamount to a denial of the doctrine of common grace. As he puts it, “The Devil and the Lost in Hell are absolutely depraved, because there is no Common Grace in Hell. The *absolute ethical antithesis* between God and ‘natural man,’ as Van Til says, must imply absolute depravity. By affirming the absolute ethical antithesis we fail to see how there can be any room left for Common Grace.”³⁰

Acknowledging Masselink's objection to the term "absolute antithesis," Van Til concedes: “In his syllabus *Common Grace and Christian Education*, Dr. William Masselink charged me with beginning my whole system of thought with the idea of the absolute ethical antithesis. I made reply to this charge in a pamphlet entitled *A Letter on Common Grace*.”³¹ He explains: “In that pamphlet I made clear that I begin rather with the creation of man as made in the image of God. Following Calvin I then speak of all men as unavoidably knowing God (Romans 1:19). All men, even after the fall, know deep down in their hearts that they are creatures of God, that they should therefore obey, but that they have actually broken the law of God.”³² He proceeds to defend a traditionally accepted doctrine of total depravity. “After the fall, therefore, all men seek to suppress the truth, infixed in their being, about themselves. They are opposed to God. This is the biblical teaching on human depravity. If, then, we are to present the truth of the Christian religion to men, we must take them where

²⁹ Ibid., 74. Masselink’s concern with Van Til claiming that the antithesis is *absolute*, and then linking the “absolute antithesis” with humanity, obliterates the *imago Dei*. He states quite clearly, “The absolute antithesis of God is the devil. If we place man ethically, in the same category with the devil, then what becomes of the image of God in man?” (*Common Grace and Christian Education*, 73)

³⁰ Ibid., 74.

³¹ Ibid., 74.

³² Ibid., 74.

they are.”³³ Van Til affirms that even fallen men are still “image of God” and that their antithesis is not metaphysical, but ethical. “They are creatures made in God's image,” he writes, “surrounded by a world that reveals in its very fact God's power and divinity. Their antithesis to God can therefore never be metaphysical. They can never become anything but image-bearers of God. They can never escape facing God in the universe about them and in their own constitution. Their antithesis to God is therefore an ethical one.”³⁴

As Van Til sees it, the doctrine of common grace is not only upheld, but is absolutely necessary. It is in virtue of this doctrine that “this ethical antithesis to God on the part of the sinner is *restrained*, and thereby the creative forces of man receive the opportunity of constructive effort. In this world the sinner does many ‘good’ things.”³⁵ It is precisely the doctrine of common grace that gives enablement “to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow man [and keep] the moral law. Therefore the antithesis, besides being ethical rather than metaphysical, is limited in a second way. It is one of principle, not one of full expression. If the natural man fully expresses himself as he is in terms of the principle about the ethical hostility to God that dwells within his soul, he would then be a veritable devil.”³⁶

Addressing Masselink’s objection elsewhere, Van Til writes,

Masselink says that according to Reformed theology the antithesis is “principlial,” not absolute. “I do not believe that Reformed theology ever speaks of an ‘absolute ethical antithesis.’ By “principlial antithesis” is meant that natural man *in principle* is dead in sin and completely depraved. “Natural man, however, is absolutely depraved in principle.” [*Torch and Trumpet*, 15]³⁷ Masselink therefore also uses the term absolute with respect to the total depravity of man. And I have repeatedly used the qualification that the depravity is absolute only *in principle*. The only difference at this point seems to be that I had one more qualification than does Masselink. I am careful to note that

³³ Ibid., 45.

³⁴ Ibid., 45.

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid., 45.

³⁷ A reference to *Torch and Trumpet* 3, no. 6 (1953): 15.

the antithesis is *ethical*, and not metaphysical. I do not discover this distinction in Masselink. Perhaps this failure accounts for the fact that at other points he reasons as though the antithesis is not absolute in principle even when this antithesis is conceived of ethically. I referred to the fact that he follows Dr. Vallentine Hepp in his idea that there are general ideas of God, of man, and of the universe on which Christians and non-Christians have no *principial* difference.³⁸

In perhaps his most well-known work, *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til boldly asserts that there "are no atheists, least of all in the hereafter. Metaphysically speaking then, both parties, believers and unbelievers, have all things in common; they have God in common, they have every fact in the universe in common. And they know they have them in common. All men know God, the true God, the only God."³⁹ He goes on to address their knowledge of God: "They do not merely have a capacity for knowing him, but actually do know him."⁴⁰ Since man is inescapably a contingent creature, the conclusion is apparent: "Thus there is not and can never be an absolute separation between God and man. Man is always accessible to God. There can be no *absolute* antithesis in this sense of the term."⁴¹ Van Til's antithesis, then, expands to include an epistemological antithesis.

Frame and Bahnsen

The two most strident exponents of Van Tillian presuppositionalism are John M. Frame and Greg L. Bahnsen. Each of these successors of Van Til grappled with his work and advanced his thought in their own way, and in discernibly different directions. Frame has

³⁸ Ibid., 46. Van Til wanted to be clear that despite the "ethical antithesis" being absolute, this is not tantamount to making humanity on par with Satan. On page 34 of his *A Letter on Common Grace*, he quips, "It appears then that the section in which I did use the expression "absolute ethical antithesis" is mainly directed against those who would interpret the idea of the antithesis to mean that man is as bad as he can be. The whole burden of the argument is that to hold to the idea of absolute or total ethical depravity does not need to, and must not, lead to the idea that man is now [fully] satanic. Since the antithesis is ethical and not metaphysical, God's restraining grace keeps man from being as bad as he can be" (Cited in Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th Edition [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008], 395).

³⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 177.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 177.

⁴¹ Ibid., 177.

admittedly been more critical of Van Til's work than most other Van Tillians. Bahnsen, on the other hand, tried to stay as true to Van Til's convictions and outlook as possible. As we shall see, both of these individuals had great influence in the field of apologetics, but at times took each other to task.

John M. Frame

In Brian Morley's estimation, "John Frame (1939-) is perhaps the best-known presuppositionalist today and has worked to maintain Van Til's core insights while significantly modifying many aspects of his views."⁴² Though space and time do not allow for elaboration on where Frame departs from the Van Tillian "party line," suffice to say that Frame believes there is legitimate use of traditional theistic arguments in apologetics. Let us turn now, however, to Frame's critique of Van Til as well as his own discussion on the nature of antithesis.

First, Frame acknowledges what has been established thus far regarding Van Til's notion of antithesis, namely that "...Van Til's theological formulations all reinforce Machen's antithesis"⁴³ and that "Van Til often expresses the antithesis as an opposition between two 'principles' at war with one another. The unbeliever is in principle sold out to Satan, the believer to God. But neither is perfect in his allegiance."⁴⁴ Stressing the importance of Van Til's contribution in general, and his use of the antithesis in particular, Frame provides a brief justification for Van Til's approach and *modus operandi*: "The most conspicuous feature of

⁴² Morely, 90.

⁴³ "Van Til on Antithesis," 82.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

Van Til's position," he states, "is the 'antithesis' between believing and unbelieving thought."⁴⁵ Frame elaborates:

This antithesis is the diametrical opposition between belief and unbelief and therefore between belief and any compromise of revealed truth. The concept of antithesis is one of Van Til's major concerns, and it is the element in his thought that has brought him the most severe criticism. In the present pluralistic theological climate, it seems particularly difficult to draw lines sharply enough to support Van Tillian talk of antithesis: lines between denominational traditions, between liberal and conservative, between Christianity and other religions, between belief and unbelief. Universalism is taken for granted in contemporary liberal theology, and conservative Christian thinkers, if not going that far, often tend nevertheless to play down the differences between themselves and others. Is it necessary, or even possible, to maintain Van Til's emphasis in our time and to repudiate all these tendencies toward accommodation? Or did Van Til overstate his case, unnecessarily inhibiting biblical ecumenism? Or is the truth to be found somewhere between these two evaluations? As we consider the matter of antithesis, we must simultaneously consider the doctrine of common grace, which teaches that God restrains sin in the unregenerate. On the basis of common grace, Van Til maintains that unbelievers know some truth despite their sin and that's a fact. It might seem at first glance that antithesis and common grace are opposed to one another, at least in the sense that one limits the other.⁴⁶

Frame believes Van Til maintained a strong emphasis on antithesis in order to preserve the integrity of the movement of which he was a part. In his journal article entitled "Van Til on Antithesis," Frame offers the following assessment: "In my view, he saw himself as the heir to Kuyper and Machen, and he saw his responsibility as that of maintaining the antithesis mentality in the Machen movement and promoting it throughout the larger church. His greatest concern was that that sense of opposition to unbelief might lose its sharpness."⁴⁷ Elsewhere he explains that ". . . his more careful analyses of antithesis (normative, situational, existential, and practical) did warrant the view that the effects of depravity upon the unbeliever were comprehensive, so that it could be said that in one sense the unbeliever

⁴⁵ *CVT*, 187.

⁴⁶ *CVT*, 187-188.

⁴⁷ "Van Til on Antithesis," 100-101.

‘knows nothing truly.’ He very likely felt that these considerations justified his extreme formulations.”⁴⁸ Observe Frame's comment that some of Van Til's formulations were "extreme." It appears Frame believes Van Til's use of these extreme formulations was at times intentional, and yet at other times he had unintentionally strayed too far from the field. In his substantial piece on Van Til, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, Frame is critical of Van Til's use of these "extreme formulations." He writes,

I think . . . Van Til got carried away with his own rhetoric of antithesis. But that sort of thing is not uncommon in Van Til's writings, and it indicates something of the passion with which Van Til promoted the concept of antithesis as a key to apologetics and even to the prosecution of differences between Christians. And it gets still brighter. To Van Til, antithesis is not only a means of criticizing others, but also a key to the very formulation of Christian truth.⁴⁹

Antithesis is central to Van Til's thought, then, not only because it is useful in terms of its apologetical utility, but because it is central to the very understanding of the Christian faith itself. In Frame's estimation, Van Til makes good use of antithesis because, by it, Christians may be better equipped to “speak the truth in love,” so to speak.

Second, Frame sees Van Til as, to use his own phrase, a “consolidator of the Machen Reformation.” As such, he, like Machen before him, must “beat the drum of antithesis.”

As the consolidator of the Machen Reformation, Van Til rethinks the whole system of Christian theology and reformulates it with the concept of antithesis in view. He does that by showing that Christian theology is a system of truth, that its elements are so profoundly interrelated that to deny one doctrine is implicitly to deny the whole. . . . Hence, Van Til's theological formulations, like his apologetic, reinforce the Machenite antithesis. Understanding Van Til as the consolidator of the Machen reformation helps us to understand better the role his thinking plays in many Reformed circles today.⁵⁰

Viewing Van Til in this way is helpful, for “If Van Til is essentially the Kuyperian-

⁴⁸ *CVT*, 211.

⁴⁹ *CVT*, 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

Machenite philosopher of antithesis, we can understand why he is often treated merely as a movement leader, even though he is so much more than that.”⁵¹

As a Van Tillian, Frame is careful, on the one hand, to maintain the need to uphold the role and place of antithesis, and yet, on the other hand, exercise caution so as to not go so far as to undermine the doctrines of common grace and *imago Dei*. In somewhat of a summary statement about this, he gives voice to his concerns:

The point is not that we (we Van Tillians) must de-emphasize Van Til's doctrine of antithesis in favor of his doctrine of common grace. To do that would be to rob Van Tillian thought of all its distinctiveness. Rather, what we must do is to understand and make use of the full dimensions of Van Til's thinking about the antithesis, rather than to practice a "Van Tillian apologetics" which simply takes his most extreme formulations at face value. Such extreme and literalist uses of Van Tillian antithesis actually tend to weaken Van Til's teaching in this area, for they tend to describe "antithesis" largely in intellectual terms, as if it were merely about one group of propositions logically contradicting another. In fact, Van Til's "antithesis" is far more than that. It is a teaching about the whole life of man, believing and unbelieving, about the conflict of the ages between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the wicked one. This conflict embraces the intellect, but it also embraces every other area of human life. And we do not see adequately how the antithesis affects the intellect until we see how sin places the intellect, together with all the rest of life, into the service of an idol. When we understand the antithesis in its full dimensions, we will see more fully the legitimacy of the "great gulf" language in certain contexts.⁵²

Like Van Til, Frame wants to stress the nature of the antithesis as essentially twofold: a matter of the heart and a matter of human thinking. With respect to the ethical/heart condition he states, "...the antithesis is regeneracy versus unregeneracy, a good heart versus a bad one; and that in turn is, as Van Til always insists, an ethical issue."⁵³ Along with Van Til, Frame is careful to maintain the central role ethics plays with respect to the antithesis: "As Van Til establishes in his "metaphysics of knowledge," God does expect us

⁵¹ Ibid., 44.

⁵² "Van Til on Antithesis," 101.

⁵³ Ibid., 95.

to honor him as the ultimate source and standard of knowledge. The nature of sin is to deny such honor to God. The unbeliever seeks, through his words and thoughts, to deny God's rightful honor. Thus there is antithesis."⁵⁴

With respect to the epistemological antithesis, Frame asks, "Does Van Til want to say, for example, that unbelievers have no ability to think logically? No, says Van Til."⁵⁵ Although the ability of the unregenerated mind is not truncated, it is still not used properly. "Van Til is saying that the unbeliever may be very competent in logic, just as he may have other natural gifts in abundance. Believers do not necessarily excel unbelievers in intelligence; indeed, the opposite is often true: not many wise are called (1 Corinthians 1:26). But the unbeliever uses his natural gifts to repress and attack the truth."⁵⁶ Van Til was known for his witty statements and, at this point, I am reminded that he would probably say that the use of the mind for the unbeliever is like one "using a buzz-saw in the wrong direction." Frame describes the nature of the case: "Instead of presupposing God's revelation as the ultimate criterion of truth, the sinner presupposes (as Kant advocated so clearly and explicitly) that his autonomy is the ultimate principle of being and knowledge. Thus, fallen man stands in antithesis to God and God's people as well."⁵⁷ Unbelieving thought inevitably reduces to absurdity, for it cannot account for itself. This is God's world, and since "this is God's world, no unbelieving system can adequately account for it; such a system therefore will of its own nature generate problems. The main problem, of course, is

⁵⁴ "Van Til on Antithesis," 92.

⁵⁵ *CVT*, 153.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 153–154.

⁵⁷ *CVT*, 189.

that the unbeliever misses what is obvious, since God is revealed clearly in creation."⁵⁸

The nature of antithesis in Frame's account is affirmed as both ethical and epistemological. Curiously, however, when Frame defines antithesis in his most recent book, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, he simply defines antithesis as "the opposition between Christian and non-Christian thought."⁵⁹ As we will see, he is not the only one to do so.

Bringing the account of professor Frame to a close, let us take a look at a significant assessment he provides of antitheses (of various sorts) in an online article entitled "Antithesis and the Doctrine of Scripture." He clarifies that "The Bible often divides people into two classes, antithetically related. There are the sons of Cain and of Seth (Gen. 4-6), Israel and the nations (Ex. 19:5-6), the righteous and the wicked (Ps. 1), the wise and the foolish (Prov. 1:7), the saved and the lost (Matt. 18:11), the children of Abraham and those of the devil (John 8:39-44), the elect and the nonelect (Rom. 9), believers and unbelievers (1 Cor. 6:6), practitioners of the wisdom of the world and of the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1-2), those who walk in the light and those who walk in darkness (1 John 1:5-10), the church and the world (1 John 2:15-17)."⁶⁰ Frame is quick to point out, however, that these "antitheses aren't all equivalent. That is to say that they are not simply alternate names for the same two groups. The distinction between elect and nonelect, for example, is not the same as the distinction between believer and unbeliever. There are elect people among the current groups of

⁵⁸ "Van Til on Antithesis," 93.

⁵⁹ John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2016), 289.

⁶⁰ John M. Frame, "Antithesis and the Doctrine of Scripture." An online journal article accessed June 2, 2016 at <http://frame-poythress.org/antithesis-and-the-doctrine-of-scripture/> It should be noted that this article was Frame's inaugural lecture on assuming the J.D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

unbelievers, and that fact motivates missions and evangelism.”⁶¹

Further, the antithesis between wise and foolish, for example, is a division within the body of professing believers. Nevertheless, wisdom and not foolishness is the mentality proper to believers in the Lord. Foolishness really belongs outside of God's people. In a believer, foolishness contradicts his belief in God. In the consummation of glory, all believers will be wise, not foolish. The antithesis of belief/unbelief and elect/non-elect, is also a distinction destined for dissolution.⁶²

All will not remain as it is currently. “In the end,” Frame says, “all elect will be believers, just as, even now, all nonelect are unbelievers. In that way, given these nuances and qualifications, the antitheses actually coalesce.”⁶³ He brings it to a noteworthy conclusion: “There is a great big ugly ditch, to abuse the metaphor of Lessing, that runs through the human community. Some are on one side, some on the other. Although the location of that which is not always plain today, God will make it plain in his final judgment. Eventually the inconsistencies of believers and unbelievers will be erased, everyone will show their true colors, and the antithesis will be fully manifest.”⁶⁴ It appears, then, that the antithesis will endure *ad infinitum*.

Greg Bahnsen

In similar fashion as Frame, Greg Bahnsen identified Van Til's view of the antithesis as ethically and epistemologically centered:

This theme of the principal, epistemological and ethical antithesis between the regenerate, Bible-directed mind of the Christian and the autonomous mind of the sinner (whether expressed by the avowed unbeliever or by the unorthodox modern theologian), remained part of Van Til's distinctive teaching throughout his career.⁶⁵

Bahnsen believed the notion of antithesis to be absolutely fundamental to understanding

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Bahnsen, “At War with the Word”

Scripture itself. "The antithesis between followers of God and followers of Satan is summarily inflicted as God's judicial curse. This enmity is not only social but also intellectual in nature, and, therefore, to ignore it in our apologetic is to compromise the gospel. *Without the ingredient of antithesis, Christianity is not simply anemic, it has altogether forfeited its challenge to all other worldviews.*"⁶⁶

With great eloquence Bahnsen stresses the seriousness and far-reaching scope of the antithesis, noting it is set in place by God Himself. "The opposition and antithesis between followers of God and followers of Satan is not simply protected by God and is not simply commanded; *it is sovereignly inflicted as God's judicial curse.* The distinction and antipathy between the two seeds must and indeed will be maintained. Only in that light do we properly understand and hope in the Messiah's crushing defeat of the tempter."⁶⁷ This is important, for, in Bahnsen's view, if at any point the antithesis were "disregarded, diluted or dispelled, the very meaning of the gospel of salvation would be lost — either by consigning all men indiscriminately to the production of Satan, or by neglecting the discriminating love of God, which Paul says in Colossians 1:13, 'delivered us out of the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son.'"⁶⁸ The inevitable consequence is that the "entire biblical message of redemption and the historical establishing of God's kingdom both presuppose 'the antithesis,' and are then, between the people of God and the culture of unbelief, between the regenerate and the unregenerate."⁶⁹

In our current twenty-first century American context, there seems to be an ever-

⁶⁶ Ibid.; emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Ibid.; emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

persistent pull toward religious pluralism with respect to social dynamics on the one hand, and invariant secularism with respect to political dynamics on the other. Discussions of “irreconcilable differences” of worldview are rarely welcomed, it seems. Addressing this, in part, Bahnsen highlights a general resistance in even acknowledging the antithesis which exists. “The spirit of our age or culture, however, is not only antithetical to the perspective of God's Spirit as generally revealed in the Scriptures; it is in particular antithetical to the biblical view of antithesis itself.”⁷⁰ Instead of wholeheartedly accepting the unavoidable antithesis, “The enmity or antithesis between the regenerate and unregenerate mind, as presaging the final antithesis of heaven and hell is renounced by the modern spirit in the hope that all the world might someday ‘live as one.’”⁷¹ Openness to the possibility that the world is the way Scripture declares it to be is simply viewed as laughable, if even acknowledged at all. “The biblical antithesis between light and darkness, between God-honoring wisdom and God-defying foolishness, between the mind of the Spirit and the mind of the flesh is an offense to the modern mentality.”⁷² His final analysis is really quite telling:

Accordingly, our age is characterized by intellectual pluralism and the spirit of *rap-prochement*, not at all by a recognition of, or a regard for, a categorical antithesis between Christian and non-Christian viewpoints. The results of neglecting the God-ordained perspectival antithesis between Christianity in the world is, as one might naturally expect, a failure of nerve in maintaining any distinctive and unqualified religious truth, truth which would stand out clearly against every view which falls short of it or runs counter to it. “Nobody is wrong if everybody is right” has become the unwitting operating premise of modern theology.⁷³

The most comprehensive analysis by Bahnsen with respect to Van Til’s work is his

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analyses. It is viewed, by many, to be the signature treatment of Van Til to date. In it, he points out that "[p]ersonal qualities and factors (attitudes, desires, aims, prejudices, and defects) will be operative in any expression of opinion, line of reasoning, system of thought, or interpretation."⁷⁴ The underlying motivations of the heart are different for the believer and unbeliever.

Because there is a fundamental moral and spiritual contrast between believer and unbeliever — one is seeking to glorify God and understand the world in the light of God's word, while the other is self-seeking and in rebellion against God's word — the way in which they reason and argue will manifest in antithesis in attitude. Their subjective difference in attitude will affect everything they touch – everything about which they think and express themselves.⁷⁵

Bahnsen described Van Til's understanding of the "hostility" and "opposition" which exists between the regenerate and unregenerate, noting: "Van Til stressed the absolute personal hostility and philosophical opposition between the essential nature of unbelief (resistance to God) and that of belief (submission to God's word and authority). In distilled form, we have death set over against life, or utter ignorance versus genuine knowledge."⁷⁶ He admits that this "kind of antithetical teaching left Van Til vulnerable to misinterpretation and criticism."⁷⁷

Earlier in this paper I quoted Frame taking issue with Van Til's "extreme formulations" of antithesis. Without attributing too much space to Bahnsen's defense of Van Til and subsequent rebuke of Frame's criticism, a brief summation of it is as follows:

It is . . . odd that [Frame] would fault Van Til for allegedly making some (very few, actually) "extreme" and unqualified statements of the antithesis. Van Til tipped off his readers that his statements about the unbeliever's personal condition (as it relates to

⁷⁴ *VTA*, 273.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 414.

ethics and epistemology) were generalizations which, for the sake of accuracy, are "hemmed in" by other descriptions; these other descriptions, then, were intended to qualify his preceding generalizations.⁷⁸

Bahnsen claims that "*Faith is the necessary foundation or framework for rationality and understanding.*"⁷⁹ Continuing Van Til's offensive presuppositional apologetic strategy, he suggests that "in order to press this epistemologically oriented apologetic argument for the truth of Christianity successfully, the apologist must clearly grasp the principal conflict in philosophical positions, think and reason in terms of it, and constantly layout for the unbeliever this fundamental clash in perspectives as the *defining and determinative* context for their argument with each other."⁸⁰ The informed apologist would do well to be self-aware with respect to the antithesis. According to Bahnsen, "The Christian should intellectually defend his faith in terms of, and with a clear conceptualization of, the ideological and personal antithesis between believers and unbelievers."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Footnote 14, VTA, 413. In full, he states: "According to Frame's article "Van Til on Antithesis," Van Til was "fond" of his "extreme" formulations of the antithesis between the believer and the unbeliever (p. 100) and "often" spoke "in ways that suggest the unbeliever knows no truth at all and therefore has literally no area of agreement with the believer" (87); these extreme formulations were "simplistic" (suggesting that every utterance of the unbeliever is false), were not "careful," and indeed we're not very "defensible scripturally" (p. 102). Frame even charges that they are "inconsistent with" or "contradict" (86, 94, 98) what Van Til says elsewhere about the "complexity" of the unbeliever's situation: e.g., unbelievers have a revealed knowledge of God, are unable to suppress it completely, recognize Him against their wills, presuppose Him even while denying it, and recognize the unsatisfactory character of their philosophical systems! This is an odd criticism. It would seem far more reasonable and fair to conclude that these latter statements by Van Til demonstrate rather convincingly that the previous statements were not properly interpreted as "extreme" in the first place. After all, Frame himself must acknowledge that, taken literally and out of context, those statements do not represent the "complexity," "flexibility," "subtlety," and "richness" of Van Til's views (pp. 99, 100, 101, 102). No contradiction has been demonstrated to exist between Van Til's various explanations (or "strategies for reconciling antithesis with common grace") when they are interpreted in the light of each other. Since Frame characteristically takes just such a charitable approach in his analysis of other authors, it is hard to understand why he fails to do so here. In describing Van Til's "extreme" formulations of antithesis, Frame attributes to him — without any specific textual substantiation (but resting instead on what "seems" to be an implication of what Van Til actually wrote, or on what Van Til "suggests") — the views that the unbeliever's "conclusions" are always false, that he never utters a true sentence "except" formally, and that believers and unbelievers are speaking "different languages" (c.f. p. 91). (Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, footnote 13, pp. 412–413)

⁷⁹ VTA, 273.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 273.

⁸¹ Ibid., 273.

In sum, Bahnsen speaks of the antithesis mostly in terms of worldview conflict and epistemological opposition, but does occasionally address it as principal, spiritual and/or ethical. Yet again, it is quite curious that, similar to Frame, Bahnsen's definition of antithesis in his written works is reduced merely to one that is epistemological.⁸²

Additional Van Tillians

Before we cover the views of additional Van Tillians on the notion of antithesis, let us briefly recap what has been determined to this point. (1) The thought of Van Til was influenced by Abraham Kuyper and J. Gresham Machen, especially in terms of their antithetical outlook; (2) Though William Masselink held the antithesis to be principal only, Van Til maintained that the nature of the antithesis was both “absolute” and “ethical”; out of this framework he began to elaborate upon the epistemological antithesis; (3) Frame reiterates Van Til’s understanding of the antithesis as both ethical and epistemological in nature, but he rejects Van Til’s “extreme formulations” and begins parsing varieties of antithesis, for they “aren’t all equivalent”; and (4) Bahnsen affirms Van Til’s view of antithesis, rejects Frame’s critique of Van Til’s formulations as “extreme,” and cogently expounds upon spiritual, biblical and epistemological antitheses. Let us now consider some of the insights of Van Tillians such as K. Scott Oliphint, Dennis E. Johnson and Richard Gaffin, Jr. Each will be addressed in turn.

⁸² In *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, Edited by Gary DeMar (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision Press, 2007), he states on page 271: "Antithesis is based on two Greek words: *anti-* ("against") and *tithenai* ("to set or place"). 'Antithesis' speaks of opposition or a counterpoint. As Christians we must recognize the fundamental disagreement between biblical thought and all forms of unbelief at the foundational level of our theory of knowing her knowledge."

K. Scott Oliphint

Perhaps the most significant amendment to the notion of antithesis since Van Til has come from K. Scott Oliphint. Current Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Oliphint has suggested that Van Tillians refrain from the use of the term “presupposition” or “presuppositionalism,” and instead, embrace the term “covenantal apologetics.” In his book bearing the same name, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith*, he makes the following point: “The Christian perspective on suffering is in diametrical opposition to my [unbelieving] friend’s. This is not surprising. There is an antithesis between Christian and non-Christian; as we said, one is either in Christ or in Adam. That antithesis is not merely theoretical. It applies to the way we think, the way we act, and the way we view the world.”⁸³ Throughout the book Oliphint lays out “ten tenets” of a consistently “covenantal apologetic.” Explicitly, tenet number seven reads as follows: “There is *an absolute covenantal antithesis* between Christian theism and any other opposing position. Thus, Christianity is true and anything opposing it is false.”⁸⁴ Notice how close the phrase “absolute covenantal antithesis” is with Van Til’s original claim of “absolute ethical antithesis.” This is not coincidental, but intentional on Oliphint’s part. This move is advisable, for it reframes the antithesis away from sheer “outlook” or “worldview” and returns the discussion to “ultimate commitments.”

⁸³ K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 33.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 51; emphasis added. He continues (on the same page), saying “This should be obvious to any Christian, but it is oftentimes not as prominent in our thinking as it ought to be. When we claim to be Christians, we are doing more than just listing a biographical detail. We are claiming that the truth set forth in God’s revelation describes the way things *really and truly* are in the world. That is, we are saying that what God’ says about the world is the way the world *really* is. Any view or position that opposes what God has said is therefore, by definition, false and does not ‘fit’ with the way the real world is. This means that the views of any who remain in unbelief are, in reality, illusions.”

In this case, one's ultimate commitment is doxological, or worship-oriented. It provides a more robust theological grounding for the antithesis, in my view. As the editor of the latest editions of Van Til's *Defense of the Faith* and *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Oliphint makes mention of this reorientation by way of footnote. He states,

This is perhaps the most important point to be made with respect to Van Til's view of the antithesis. It is likely that Warfield, in his discussions with Kuyper on the antithesis, interpreted Kuyper's holding to an absolute metaphysical antithesis, in which there is an ontological difference between Christians and non-Christians. Van Til tried to make clear that the antithesis was *ethical*, not *metaphysical*, in that it applies to one's relationship to God; one is either a covenant keeper or a covenant breaker, and there is no third category. It might be better expressed if we affirm that the antithesis is covenantal in essence, since the notion of ethical can be too general and itself can have connotations that would not apply in this case.⁸⁵

Oliphint does well to point toward a more holistic and consistent way of thinking of the antithesis. It certainly is ethical and epistemological, but perhaps Oliphint's slight tweak can help us to make sense of these ethical and epistemological aspects being what they are because of doxological (viz. covenantal) reasons. We make moral and intellectual decisions based on our ultimate allegiance, namely, God or self.

Dennis E. Johnson

Although Johnson has relatively few things (by comparison) to highlight with respect to the nature of antithesis, he makes an important point in his journal article entitled, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace and Practical Theology." In this article he writes, "If we deny or minimize the profound impact of the spiritual antithesis, we may uncritically

⁸⁵ K. Scott Oliphint, Footnote 27, in Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 287. Elsewhere he states, "The 'absolute ethical antithesis' of which Van Til speaks is better dubbed an absolute *covenantal* antithesis in which every person is either in Adam or in Christ. Those who are in Adam suppress the truth in unrighteousness; their 'ethical' reaction to God's revelation is one of disobedience and thus is dishonoring to God (Romans 1:18-23). Those who are, by grace through faith, in Christ accept the truth as it is found in him." (Oliphint, footnote 29, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 179; see also footnote 89, page 199: "'Ethical' here could best be read as 'covenantal,' including as it does the image of God and man as essential in responsible relationship to God.")

accommodate our thought to non-Christian worldviews, naively adopting beliefs, attitudes, and methodologies that reflect their origin in the reductionism of unbelief and therefore distort our grasp of God's truth."⁸⁶ Emphasizing caution, he states, "On the other hand, if we deny or minimize the motif of common grace, we run the risk of intellectual arrogance, a defensive isolationism from the culture in general and the academy in particular."⁸⁷

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

Affirming the consistent epistemological antithesis in the Van Tillian tradition, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. states: "A clash — a sharp, unrelieved antithesis — exists between 'the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1: 21) and the wisdom of unbelief. What has been effected by God in the cross of Christ is the transvaluation of wisdom — in fact its countervaluation — as measured by the standards of 'the world,' 'this age' (1:20), constituted by unbelief and sinful rebellion."⁸⁸ Giving description to the vast chasm between believers and unbelievers, he says, ". . . It does not go too far to say believers and unbelievers belong to two different worlds; they exist in not only separate but antithetical 'universes of discourse.'⁸⁹

Gaffin addresses the convergence of common grace, *imago Dei* and the antithesis. The unbeliever remains the image of God, entirely, but only "in a negative mode." Every single capacity enjoyed as an image-bearer is engaged in rebellion against God. In this respect, common grace, with its restraining affects, is not to be overlooked or minimized, and certainly deserves more attention than I give it here. But, contrary to a frequent misconception, the maintenance of the divine image is not simply an unmitigated benefit of common grace; the image, however exactly it is to be defined,

⁸⁶ Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace and Practical Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2002): 77.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸⁸ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "Epistemological Reflections on 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," in K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 19-20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

makes human sin, *human sin*.⁹⁰

Common grace, says Gaffin, is inextricably linked to the human condition, but it does not erase the antithesis: “Common grace does moderate the consequences of the antithesis between belief and unbelief, but not the antithesis itself — a crucial distinction; common grace and the antithesis do not function in inverse proportion to each other. Common grace may make unbelievers genuinely ‘nicer’ but does not reduce their enmity toward God one whit (Romans 8:7).”

Antithesis as an ‘Ontological Discordancy’

As we have seen, a majority of Van Tillians speak of the antithesis primarily in epistemological terms and mainly within the field of apologetics. There have, however, been slight, but significant modifications to it; we noted earlier the insightful development by K. Scott Oliphint. Recall that his take on the antithesis is not simply that it is ethical or epistemological, but that it is *covenantal* in nature: “There is an absolute covenantal antithesis between Christian theism and any other, opposing position.”⁹¹ This adjustment is significant, for Oliphint recognizes that the ethical and epistemological discordancy between belief and unbelief flows out of a person’s ultimate covenantal commitment; namely, one’s moral and intellectual allegiance will follow his/her ultimate covenantal alliance. Since unregenerate man is covenantally autonomous and a covenant-breaker with respect to his/her Creator, s/he will live accordingly.

At this point I would like to suggest that Masselink, Van Til, Frame, Bahnsen, Johnson, Gaffin and Oliphint each offer a piecemeal analysis of the antithesis and do not go

⁹⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁹¹ Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 51.

far enough in their explication of the nature of it both in terms of its scope and nature. The antithesis is what it is because of a substantial, ontological discordancy between fallen mankind and redeemed mankind. If the axiom is true that “doing flows from being,” will this not apply to the two natures (old and new) of humanity? Though sharing many things in common due to their being created in the image of God, Scripture points to regenerate man as no longer being properly situated in this fallen world. We are ‘heavenly citizens’ (Phil. 3:20), ‘not of this world’ (John 17:16) and ‘strangers and exiles on the earth’ (Heb. 11:13). “Salvation brings about a radical change in the nature of the believer.”⁹² A true believer becomes a “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17)—something transformational has occurred. “The one who is in Christ and has experienced the new birth is a part of the new creation.”⁹³ Paul describes the discontinuity between believers and disbelievers: “*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one* (1 Cor. 2:14-15).” Paul’s contrast of the “spiritual” person with the “natural” person is not merely a description of relation (coventantal) or of function (moral, intellectual, volitional), but addresses an ontological (spiritual) reality. The expression “natural man” (*psychikos*) is indicative of a “man who does not possess the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁴ That is, the unregenerate person is by nature a “human being with a normal physical life and natural human faculties, but without the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁵

⁹²John MacArthur, *Freedom From Sin* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1987), 69.

⁹³Rienecker, Fritz & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1980), 469.

⁹⁴Ibid., 392.

⁹⁵Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 128.

Simply stated, the discordancy between believers and disbelievers is what it is because *substantially* they are different.

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