“The influence of Geerhardus Vos and Cornelius Van Til stands like a colossus in the story of the development of reformed theology in the 20th century. For me their contribution was defining. They figured hugely in my own education at seminary and beyond into a lifetime of ministry. Dr. Dennison understands their significance and his encyclopedic knowledge of his subject makes him a sure guide to their thought and its importance for the world and the church.”

—Liam Goligher
Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“In Defense of the Eschaton is an invaluable compilation of Dr. Dennison’s biblically faithful and insightful efforts in defense of the faith. With every expectation of our Lord’s blessing, I commend to the reader the work of Dr. Dennison, which is produced with scholarly excellence and theological integrity. Dr. Dennison highlights topics that will undoubtedly advance biblical theology united with presuppositional apologetics.”

—Harry L. Reeder
Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

“Cornelius Van Til has suffered the misfortune of either being dismissed or slavishly idolized. It is the merit of Dennison’s work that although Van Til is definitely his teacher, he is guilty of neither but in a clear and accessible manner illumines the profound issues of revelation, common grace, antithesis and Christian thinking that dominated discussions in the Christian Reformed and Presbyterian world of the 20th century. One need not agree with him (or Van Til) on every point to appreciate the significant historical/systematic service Dennison has provided in clarifying the Vos/Van Til nexus for a generation inclined to forget its own roots. This volume is a valuable contribution to making a fair and honest conversation possible which would be a refreshing development.”

—John Bolt
Professor of Systematic Theology, Calvin Theological Seminary
“Geerhardus Vos and Cornelius Van Til were among the most significant Reformed thinkers of the last century, their legacy an enduring one. William Dennison is an eminent scholar, a leading exponent of their thought but with distinctive contributions of his own. This collection of his writings, building on both Vos and Van Til, will be of great interest to all who recognize that only when our thinking and living is shaped and directed by the trinitarian God can we be true to his revelation in the Bible.”

—Robert Letham
Senior Lecturer in Systematic and Historical Theology and Director of Research, Wales Evangelical School of Theology

“Cornelius Van Til regularly expressed his indebtedness to the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos throughout his professorial career. Those privileged to hear Van Til preach or pray surely understood why. But because Vos’s influence on apologetics was subtle and indirect, Van Til’s claim has generally eluded many readers of his works. Among interpreters, Bill Dennison stands virtually alone for consistently underscoring this connection. As displayed first in his Paul’s Two Age Construction and Apologetics (1986), Dennison’s essays and articles, gathered helpfully in this anthology, demonstrate the necessity of reckoning with the eschatological dimension of Van Til’s work in order fully to assess his contribution to Reformed apologetics.”

—John R. Muether
Dean of Libraries and Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“Do not be misled by the word “eschaton” in the tile of this collection of the shorter writings of William Dennison. His book has nothing to do with differences between premillennialists and postmillennialists or related issues, but has everything to do with how we go about presenting our Christian faith in a world that is bitterly opposed to this faith. No one has spoken more pointedly to this question in recent times than Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA. Dennison undertakes to unfold, explain, and illustrate Van Til’s apologetic method in a compelling way. Van Til’s strength as an apologist lay in consistently maintaining his starting point and method in the redemptive history of
the Bible culminating in the final victory of the triune God over all that opposes him (the eschaton). As we press the claims of Christ we must in no way compromise 'the self-attesting Christ of Scripture as mapped out in biblical revelation and summarized in the ecumenical creeds of the early church and the Reformed confessions.' His method represented a radical departure from the evidentialist apologetic method he was taught at Princeton Seminary. Dennison very helpfully takes us through the criticisms Van Til encountered in his own Reformed camp, both from those who opposed his method and from those who sympathetically aligned themselves with his initiative. Van Til would say to his students that if we stand on the shoulders of our fathers in the faith we ought to be able to see a little further. Van Til's own work illustrates that point, and so also does Dennison's. 'Taking Van Til's own acknowledgement that [Geerhardus] Vos was his most influential teacher [at Princeton], I have attempted to push Van Til's biblical apologetic deeper into the fabric of God's revelation.' Tying Van Til's apologetic method into a biblical philosophy of history is the most valuable contribution of this book. Dennison helps us by strengthening the apologetic backbone of believers as we face up to new challenges posed by rapid changes in the intellectual and cultural landscape where we are called to serve today.”

—Norman Shepherd
Pastor, Holland, Michigan

“For those not familiar with Dr. Dennison’s work, his distinctive contributions in this series of articles outline the implications for Christian apologetics of the evident intrinsic integration that exists in Van Til’s thought with the philosophy of history inherent in the Biblical Reformed theology of Geerhardus Vos. In this volume, Dennison provides the Reformed church and the Christian academy with a key that helps to unlock a Biblically faithful defense and declaration of the Christian faith. From this starting point, Dennison provides a cogent critique of structural and substantial shortcomings in the arguments of the most prominent proponents of classical apologetics and education. He also effectively critiques the most recent previous, popular, and prevailing interpreters of Van Til in a way that calls for a fuller response from them. Taken together, this book presents a challenge to any and all existing models for human thought
that do not hold as necessary and sufficient the aeonic, historical character of divine redemptive revelation fulfilled in the self-attesting Christ of the Scriptures. As such, this volume offers, at once, an elenctic indictment against unbelieving and biblically inconsistent thought and a faithfully Reformed and ecumenical invitation to defend this faith by all who hold to and love the Bible as the infallible Word of God. To be sure, this seminal contribution requires and deserves greater elaboration even beyond this collection. What Dennison himself admits concerning one article may also be affirmed with regard to this brief book: ‘My study is only meant to be an introduction. I have not provided a comprehensive presentation of Van Til’s philosophy of history, epistemology, or his connection with Vos. Van Tilians must have a renewed commitment to disclose, understand, and carefully reexamine the basic presuppositions that underlie the structure of his thought.’ The book, however, does afford, as a starting point, manifold opportunities for continuing dialogue, discussion, and debate on how we evangelize our communities, educate in our schools, and counsel in our churches. This prospect all by itself makes a careful and critical reading of this book well worthwhile. My prayer is that Dennison’s arguments herein will be considered carefully, engaged faithfully, and applied persuasively to ‘destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and [to] take every thought captive to obey Christ’ (II Corinthians 10:5, ESV).”

—Christopher H. Wisdom
Vice President and Professor of Practical Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary

“It would be impossible for me to overestimate the influence of Van Til’s apologetic on my thought and indeed my life. Navigating the halls of three secular postgraduate academic institutions, I have carried with me the toolkit of transcendental critique and, more specifically, an awareness of the myth of objectivity, which I weave through my teaching and my conversations with unbelievers. In making Van Til’s work accessible, Bill Dennison offers in this collection an invaluable means of putting on the full armour of God so that we may resist captivity by the philosophies of the world. Reading his essays has refreshed me, and I highly recommend them to every Christian.”

—Valerie Hobbs
Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, University of Sheffield; Fellow in Christianity and Language and Associate Director of the Lydia Center for Women and Families, Greystone Theological Institute
“Whether one agrees or not with the apologetic methods of Cornelius Van Til, his unique contributions to the discipline must be considered. William Dennison has spent a lifetime engaged in this work and his students and readers have been the beneficiaries. In the collected pages of this volume, the reader is helpfully led by the hand into the mind and thoughts of one of the most unique theologians of the modern age.”

—Jason Helopoulos
Associate Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan

“I am very pleased that James Baird has collated and edited these fine selections from the prolific pen of William Dennison in In Defense of the Eschaton. Dennison has reminded us anew of the influence of Geerhardus Vos on his pupil Cornelius Van Til. Dennison demonstrates the essential nexus between covenantal (presuppositional) apologetics and the eschatologically infused redemptive history. It is impossible to go away from reading In Defense of the Eschaton and not now see how the truth that “eschatology precedes soteriology” suffuses the apologetic task. The antithesis between belief and unbelief reflects the reality of the overlap of this present evil age and the age to come. If I say that Dennison is brilliant and solidly biblical and Reformed, it is true but an understatement. This volume leaves the reader wanting more.”

—Jeffrey C. Waddington
Stated Supply, Knox Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

“In these essays, Dr. Dennison builds faithfully upon the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til rooted in the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos. He effectively demonstrates its wide-ranging relevance for a consistently Christian approach to not only ‘practical’ apologetics, but also inter-disciplinary issues involving philosophy, rhetoric, Christian education, and the perennial debate over ‘Christ and culture.’ The appearance of these essays in a more permanent form is a welcome addition in the library of any minister or student of Christian theology who seeks in all things to exalt the preeminence of Jesus Christ.”

—Benjamin W. Swinburnson
Minister, Lynnwood Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Lynnwood, Washington
“This book is exactly the kind we should all read more of today. It is not about this or that hot topic, or this or that current debate. Instead, it is persistently about what is ultimate: how we can know anything at all and live consistently with that. Bill Dennison shows us how by filling our vision with the self-authenticating Lord Jesus Christ, to know whom is life eternal. How can we confess this One in the face of the world’s denial and Christian scholarship’s open betrayal? Is to live really Christ, as Paul says? Take and read!”

—Marcus A. Mininger
Assistant Professor of New Testament, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

“As a young teen Dr. Dennison introduced me to the fundamentals of Christian theology. Now as a colleague, he has refreshed my exposure to the apologetics of Van Til. Anyone wanting to think further about the applications of Van Til’s thought will be helped by this collection.”

—Thomas K. Groelsema
Senior Pastor, First Christian Reformed Church, Byron Center, Michigan

“This marvelous collection of apologetic essays will encourage faith in Christ even as it sharpens the mind. It represents an eschatological approach to the life of the mind, rooting traditional Augustinian-Reformed apologetics in the rich soil of Scripture and its unapologetically firm faith in the Lord of nature, history, and rationality. Many thanks to Bill Dennison for staying true to his tribe (Presbyterian confessionalists and students of Van Til) while developing its insights in important, new ways to meet the needs of our own day.”

—Douglas A. Sweeney
Professor of Church History and the History of Christian Thought and Director of the Jonathan Edwards Center, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“It is good to see these important essays gathered in one place, forming as a whole what they couldn’t individually—a comprehensive and sustained witness to the effectiveness of a presuppositional apologetic and to the cohesiveness of Van Til’s theological and philosophical thought. Dennison’s
treatment is by turn powerful, convicting, and cumulatively overwhelming in its analysis.”

—Derek W. H. Thomas
Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

“This collection of essays is a must read for those interested in the apologetic work of Cornelius Van Til. Dr. Dennison not only helpfully describes and illumines some key aspects of Van Til’s thought (e.g., common grace, the relationship between natural and special revelation, and critique of non-Christian thought), he also develops Van Til’s apologetic in ways not often discussed. By showing Van Til’s dependence upon the pioneering work of Geerhardus Vos, Dennison offers a more robust understanding of Van Til’s work by grounding it in a sound biblical theology and then illustrating how this biblical grounding wonderfully applies to the doing of apologetics. For anyone interested in faithfully and consistently bringing the intellectual challenge of the Gospel to our day, this book is for you. Take, read, enjoy, and put it to work!”

—Stephen J. Wellum
Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Professor Dennison and I have not seen eye-to-eye with regard to Van Til, and after twenty years I am still bewildered by his critique of my approach (chapter 2 of this book). But Dennison and I both seek to honor Jesus Christ and to recognize his claims on human thought, and I honor him for that. Further, Dennison does us a service by drawing attention to Van Til, one of the most significant Christian thinkers of recent years. However one evaluates it, Dennison’s analysis of Van Til is distinctive and has influenced many students. Indeed, nobody can fully appreciate the discussion of presuppositional apologetics over the last century without taking Dennison’s approach into account. For that reason I am glad to see the book available, and I recommend it to serious students of the debates over apologetic method.”

—John M. Frame
J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando
“The voice of Bill Dennison is loud (for those who’ve heard him in person) and strong (for those who’ve read him). But Bill is not loud because he’s proud, but because he profoundly believes the Word of the Lord. For many today, epistemic skepticism is a virtue and is thought to be ‘humble apologetics.’ It is no true humility, however, to fail to take God at His Word and to refuse to acknowledge the systemic lack of intelligibility that pertains apart from the ontological Trinity and the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. There is no neutrality, Bill reminds us—we all come from the perspective of those who have been united with Christ and seated with him in heavenly places or from the vantage of those who remain only ‘in Adam’ and who are indeed the living dead. Truly, this is an apologetics rooted in redemptive history and biblical eschatology. Bill’s eschatological apologetics is a great contribution to the enterprise of defending the faith but has not sprung full-grown as Athena from the head of Zeus. Bill builds all that he does on the Word of God as understood by Augustine, Calvin, Vos, Van Til, and others of that tradition. As noted herein, however, Bill no more simply repristinates Vos and Van Til than they did Augustine and Calvin. Bill, as these first-rate integrative contributions to Van Til studies and redemptive history will show, as well as the book reviews, advances the discussion on all fronts, deftly synthesizing apologetics and eschatology more ably than any other practitioner I know. I heartily commend these essays to all readers concerned about these matters in a day in which autonomy is thought sophisticated and in which God and His Word is regarded as passé. Here we hear Bill, with all his learning and devotion to Christ, athwart history yelling ‘Stop’ to all the naysayers of Christ and His Word, seeking truly to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, walking according to the coming age while challenging those yet living in this age, appreciating both common grace and antithesis, seeking to address all in this world from the heavenly perspective of the believer, and to engage truly in a transcendental analysis of all life and thought. Take, read, apply, and enjoy! SDG!”

—Alan D. Strange
Professor of Church History, Mid-America Reformed Seminary
“This stimulating collection of essays presents a robust explanation and defense of Van Til’s apologetic for the twenty-first century. It will both make Van Til more accessible to the beginning reader and greatly assist the more discerning reader probe even more deeply into the profound truths he propagated.”

—Joel R. Beeke
President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
In Defense of the Eschaton
In Defense of the Eschaton

Essays in Reformed Apologetics

WILLIAM D. DENNISON

Edited by
James Douglas Baird

Foreword by
Lane G. Tipton

Preface by
Mark A. Garcia

WIPF & STOCK · Eugene, Oregon
To
Richard B. Gaffin Jr.
Teacher and Friend
Do you fear the foe? To be sure Satan’s power and ingenuity are great. But one little Word shall fell him. This Word tells the story of the Christ who came into the world conquering and to conquer. The powers of hell cannot prevail against him as he establishes his kingdom.

—Cornelius Van Til, “Why Westminster Today?”
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The theology of Geerhardus Vos and the apologetics of Cornelius Van Til stand out in the twentieth century as the purest antidotes for the destructive methodologies of modern philosophy and theology. Given the developments in the wake of Kant's critical philosophy, modern theology and philosophy have united in asserting that the self-contained ontological Trinity, sovereign author of a history of special revelation that has the eschatological kingdom of God in Christ at its center, cannot be allowed to form the presuppositional context for all theological and philosophical reflection. Nor can appeal be made to an inerrant, revelational record of that history of special revelation, which the confessional Reformed tradition understands as the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Modern theology and philosophy sacrifice this remnant of an “older” Augustinian and Calvinistic theology on the altar of autonomous scholarship. However, both Vos and Van Til self-consciously seek to defend the genius of Reformed theology in this post-Enlightenment context.

Vos’s formulation of a supernatural, progressive, and organic conception of a history of special revelation positions his notion of biblical theology over against all forms of “modern” biblical theology indebted to Gabler and the so-called critical tradition. In turn, Van Til’s robust apologetic, which begins with the ontological Trinity and his comprehensive covenantal revelation, both general and special, places the concrete claims of the Christian worldview over against all forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.

Nevertheless, neither Vos nor Van Til seeks merely to repristinate Augustine or Calvin. Both extend the genius of Augustinian Calvinism
Foreword

beyond its pre-Enlightenment expressions in order to deal with the unique problems that arise on the other side of the Enlightenment.

Vos seeks to set a self-consciously Reformed understanding of the history of special revelation over against various permutations of a critical notion of biblical theology. He engages the critical tradition and advances an orthodox understanding of biblical theology by dealing head on with the special problems that arise within that critical tradition.

Van Til’s apologetic is self-consciously set within the context of both modern theology and modern philosophy. Van Til never tires of setting Calvinism over against modern philosophy—whether it be absolute idealism or pragmatism—or modern theology—whether liberal or neo-orthodox. Even a cursory reading of his A Survey of Christian Epistemology or The Defense of the Faith will make this point emphatically.

Vos and Van Til unite in reasserting the theological convictions central to Augustinian Calvinism, but they enrich and apply those convictions to the new developments that arise from the pressing issues of their day. Not a shred of the older theology is abandoned. Yet that older theology begins to develop in a richer way as a result of critical engagement with those whose presuppositions and methods would seek to destroy that older theology.

It is squarely within this context that William D. Dennison has labored as a theologian and apologist. The essays in this volume are not mere restatements of Vos or Van Til. Rather, you will find here creative and constructive applications of their basic insights to topics that advance Reformed theology and apologetics.

Dr. Dennison’s work as a whole represents a high-level synthesis of the methodologies of Vos and Van Til. He seeks to apply a radically non-speculative, revelationally regulated methodology to a host of issues that neither Vos nor Van Til had opportunity to address. I enthusiastically commend to the reader the work of Dr. Dennison. His insights are penetrating, and his interests are wide-ranging. He has taken up the mantle of Vos and Van Til in both the polemical defense and constructive extension of the Reformed faith. I pray this volume finds a wide and appreciative readership.

Lane G. Tipton
Westminster Theological Seminary
April 16, 2015
Of all the seemingly ineradicable myths concerning the Christian Scriptures, none enjoyed greater traction in the heyday of modern criticism than the wildly naïve conviction that the meaning of biblical text is decipherable through acts of what we may call literary archaeology. Getting behind the text—penetrating to its allegedly more primitive and thus “authentic” redactional layers, interpreting newly discovered artifacts to accumulate authoritative near Eastern parallels, framing the relationship of the New Testament to the Old in evolutionary terms of sophisticated development—was long the presumed key to truly getting the text. We only understand the text, it was thought, if we dig behind it and look around.

Thankfully, the story of biblical studies and theology in the twentieth century included episodic arousals from the long slumber of this kind of historical criticism. To be sure, the more sober voices in this chorus of objectors have never suggested dispensing with redaction criticism, archaeology, or the hard questions of relating the apostolic witness to the Scriptures of Israel. But we find ourselves blessed to live in a time in which that most primitive and most conspicuously Christian conviction regarding Scripture is being reaffirmed for its hermeneutical and theological importance: these are, the whole and not only a part of them, the Christian Scriptures, the Scriptures of the church—and as they are given, coming down authoritatively from above and not merely arising from below, they are given as a whole, not in a panoply of disparate parts. In response to the cul-de-sac of the text-behind-and-backwards approach, we are hearing more and more of the text-forward reading and thinking.
We can imagine the difference this makes. Nahum, for instance, is a text with its own integrity to be sure. It should be read as Nahum. But, for the Christian reading, there is no such thing as a Nahum which is not part of the organic and divinely-given wholeness of the canon of Holy Scripture. There is no Nahum in the abstract; there is only the Nahum contextualized by the canon to which it invariably and providentially belongs. And this makes a difference in how we read Nahum, in what we think Nahum “means.” To answer this question of meaning, we must permit ourselves to be instructed by the meaning given Nahum by the canon as a whole, by the “message” of the canonical Scriptures in their unity. Thus the Christian reading refuses to read Nahum as though it could be read faithfully in any other way. Reading the text as given, then, believing it to be given, means reading in light of the canonical whole given to the church by the Triune God in divine inspiration and providence. Finally, this requires our admitting from the start that the Author’s locus of meaning, according to this very canonical whole, is a Person, Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and ascended. The quest for the edifying, spiritually nurturing meaning of Nahum must begin with (hermeneutical) confession of that Lord.

In regard to this last claim, it bears more than passing mention that this salutary development goes hand in hand with the explosion of interest in the history of Scripture’s reception, namely, pre-modern, and particularly patristic, hermeneutics. Their subtlety, richness, and living density has come home to us again, as numerous recent projects and publication series demonstrate. The earliest of these post-biblical adumbrations of Christian reading is the so-called “Rule of Faith” (regula fidei), a creed-like Rule that in fact is more canonical in origins than patristic, having its roots in the critically important phenomenon of the Scriptures reading themselves. The Rule is in Irenaeus, Hyppolytus, and Clement of Alexandria, yes, but only after it was (in ways fitting their covenantal-historical location) in the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, the “yet for us” of 1 Corinthians 8:6, and the “elementary doctrine of Christ” of Hebrews 6:1–2. In short, the “Rule,” which is a brief Christologically-focused sketch of the most central and non-negotiable of Christian convictions, “ruled” or determined right readings of particular Scriptures in light of the meaning of the whole.

The Rule is again entrancing modern scholars of text and theology, for, in a time of disenchantment with historical criticism, it challenges the assumptions that drove biblical studies into the wilderness for generations. Recovery of the Rule reminds us that, in the Scriptures, we behold Christ
and we hear Christ as a matter of faith, not as a matter of historical sight or archaeological skill. It is a simple, practical confidence that Christ’s voice in his Word is heard most faithfully by his sheep who hear and who follow. In other words, the church is not an obstacle to rigorous biblical study and theology. The Rule provides, if you like, the precondition of a faithful reading of the Scriptures, the things which—at once arising from the Word and also illuminating that same Word—must be presupposed to hear this Word well, to hear it as a Christian.

To be sure, these voices have been rather lonely and have not (yet?) won the day. Biblical scholars and theologians continue regularly to assume Gabler’s infamous division of biblical studies from theology, treating Scripture as (in fact, as less than) any other human text. Theologians continue to labor to bridge Lessing’s ditch between revelation and history.

But not all. Enter Cornelius Van Til.

Yes, Van Til may be the last person to come to mind in light of the foregoing. Known for his pointed criticisms of both foes and allies of the Christian faith, his often impenetrable and painful prose, and his sometimes maddening revisionist use of vocabulary, he seems an unlikely ally for advancing anything like the hermeneutical and theological catholicity just described. But behind those undeniable features of the man’s work stands what many regard as one of the finest theological minds of the last century. And by all accounts, this mind was animated not by mere intellectual curiosity or by an unsavory predilection for conflict, but by love and fear of the Lord. Van Til knew the Lion which appeared as a Lamb, and he was fiercely committed to a simple fact which the best of Reformed theology had always insisted to be true: when the One who is the Truth speaks, the humble creature must listen, believe, and rejoice. Anything less is anarchic rebellion. Indeed, Van Til knew that in the Scriptures, this Lion-Lamb has truly spoken, as in history he has truly acted. Our place is to follow with awe and thanksgiving.

What, though, does Van Til have to do with the Rule and the Christian reading of Scripture in the life and fellowship of the church? On review, we notice in the Rule the distinctive Christian seedbed of Van Til’s insistence that we come to our experiences, to facts or information, or to the Scriptures themselves, not as impartial and neutral observers. Rather, we come in one or another relation to the Author of history and of Holy Writ. We come in submission or in rebellion.
Preface

This is the conviction Van Til labored tirelessly to carry out himself and to summon from his best-intentioned but as-yet-unpersuaded colleagues in the Kingdom. And, if we relate this conviction to the Rule, I suggest we meet with a refreshing and stimulating harmony. It is a harmony worth energetic exploration and requiring patient development, to be sure, but I suggest it is necessary for the ongoing development of Reformed theology.

In brief, the harmony, and the promise of it, is this: for Van Til, the Christian Faith must be assumed as true in order to make sense of anything. No doubt, some will continue the tired cry that this is an example of one’s dogmatic system imposing itself improperly upon the allegedly neutral task of reading Scripture. But we labor in a time when that vacuous objection, too, has been exposed for what it is, namely, the authoritative primacy of the individual over the text’s Author. Returning to Van Til in our context means hearing his pulsating commitment to the hermeneutical priority of God’s Triune existence as a commitment potentially enriched by, and enriching, the contemporary rediscovery of the Rule, in nub or in kernel, and within the framework of the confessional Reformed tradition. Contemporary rediscovery of the hermeneutical significance of the patristic (biblical) Rule needs the work of Van Til to apply that rediscovery more faithfully, more profitably and usefully. On the other hand, Van Til’s students need to rediscover the hermeneutical significance of the Rule (in relation to Scripture) as a way to do fuller justice to Van Til’s insight that, in theology and biblical exegesis as in all of life, we must conscientiously presuppose not merely some amorphous body of Christian affirmation but the Christian faith most faithfully summarized in the plotted points (what the early Reformed called the “most necessary doctrines”) of the catholic confessions of the Reformed tradition. We need both. The Rule without the catholic confessional Reformed tradition is mere primitivism, lacking specificity in a day of specific questions and challenges; the Reformed confessions without a sophisticated grasp of the significance of the biblical-patristic Rule is sheer traditionalism, ironically lacking catholicity. One yields a weak ecumenism and denies providence, the other turns theology into church history and denies the authority of Scripture. Van Til can help us confront both of these dangers.

In a preface I am expected not to write my own book but to say something of the book to follow, and I hope by now it is clear I have been doing just that. What is Dr. William Dennison doing in these pages? As a longtime churchman and college professor, Dr. Dennison has written for
many years on the relationship between Van Til’s theology and the nature of biblical text as redemptive revelation. It is a relationship he has explored richly, patiently, and effectively, pulling into view a wide range of concerns in apologetics, pedagogy, and ecclesiastical life. In the pages to follow, we benefit from his labors and have the special opportunity to think with him about what it might mean to share Van Til’s commitment to the consequences for life and thought of the church’s guiding conviction that the Lion-Lamb has spoken. For he has spoken, and, however we may wish to put this or that differently from Dr. Dennison—in a collection with this range of subject matter, we should consider that inevitable—let us rejoice at the opportunity. Moreover, I would also encourage the reader to participate in an edifying pleasure it commends, namely, the joy many have found in critical interpretation and appropriation of Van Til’s thought. We are greatly in need of a second and fresh look at Van Til in the light of the questions being asked in biblical studies and theology, questions for which Van Til puts us in a uniquely advantageous and promising position. To be sure, the definitive interpretive account of Van Til’s theology has yet to be written. But I trust you, too, will discover that this collection nudges in the direction of what useful biblical, theological, and ethical terrain such work might traverse.

If you please, though, I would offer one more comment on locating Dr. Dennison’s essays. Luke tells us that in the earliest days of the church, a gifted preacher and apologist arrived in Ephesus. Eloquent, educated at avant-garde Alexandria, and skilled in the Scriptures, he combined zeal with knowledge, and with notable success. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and Luke tells us confidently that what he taught concerning Jesus he taught accurately. But he lacked something. He knew only the baptism of John, not that of Jesus and the Spirit. Priscilla and Aquila heard this man, Apollos, and, out of loving concern for him and their own zeal for the good of the church, they took him under their wings and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26 ESV). It was an invaluable service rendered in charitable patience on their part, and evidently received with humble grace on his part.

Dr. Dennison here renders a Priscilla-and-Aquila-like service. There are many fine teachers, preachers, apologists, and theologians advancing the cause of the Gospel in our day. Some seem even to have the gifts of an Apollos. Dr. Dennison does not suggest otherwise; nor should we. “Getting” Van Til is not a prerequisite to usefulness. But, in this collection of
Preface

essays, Dr. Dennison comes alongside us all to explain the way of God “more accurately.” This is the contribution, among others, that Van Til made to his own students and colleagues. You may not identify with every conclusion or step in the arguments made, but do not let this deter you from the gold here. After all, if we come away from this exercise of heart and intellect better attuned to the voice of our Shepherd, that is everything to his sheep. This was Van Til’s animating desire, and it is Dr. Dennison’s as well. Confident you will enjoy that very blessing, I warmly commend Dr. Dennison’s essays to you.

Mark A. Garcia
Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church (OPC), Coraopolis, PA
President and Fellow in Scripture and Theology, Greystone Theological Institute
April 8, 2015
When James Baird came to me and spoke of this project, I did not show much excitement about the venture. However, as a result of his own unique persistent manner and our continual interaction concerning the work of Cornelius Van Til and Christian apologetics, I finally capitulated and told him to go ahead with the project. In giving permission to proceed, I told him that it would be his endeavor and that I would have little to do with it. He definitely took this directive to heart; he owns the selection, the organization, and all the work in bringing this volume to fruition. I want to thank him, and the wonderful patience of his dear wife, Georgia, for all the hours and the work he has done to make this a reality. James has been an extraordinary student who has sought to embrace faithfully Van Til’s apologetic starting point, that is, no compromise with the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. One of the best blessings teachers can receive is that their students surpass them; James Baird is such a student. I am humbled and honored that he has benefited from my work on Van Til and that he thinks it would be well for others to have this collection of essays in one volume. Moreover, the reader should examine closely his introductory essay, which captures my specific interest in and understanding of Van Til.

For editorial reasons, James Baird decided to remove the initial footnote in the chapters in which I acknowledge the specific occasion of the essay and/or convey thanks to those who helped in the production of the essay. He asked if I would place those comments here.

The third chapter, “Van Til and Common Grace,” is an essay based upon two Reformation Day lectures, which I presented to the Ohio Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Morgantown, West Virginia,
Acknowledgments

on October 28, 1995. The lectures were given to commemorate the centennial celebration of Cornelius Van Til’s birth. They were based solely upon Van Til’s volume, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, which contains a collection of his articles on common grace from 1947–1968. Reverend Larry Semel coordinated the event for the Ohio Presbytery. For chapter four, “Antithesis, Common Grace, and Plato’s View of the Soul,” special thanks to the library staff of Covenant College, who provided much assistance for this project, especially Barbara Beckman, Thomas Horner, and John Holberg. It should be noted that chapter six, “The Christian Apologist in the Present State of Redemptive History,” is an abridged edition of the opening section of my course “Christian Apologetics” at Northwest Theological Seminary in Lynnwood, Washington. Moreover, chapter eight, “A Reassessment of Natural and Special Revelation,” with some revisions, is an essay based on a public lecture on August 13, 2005, at Northwest Theological Seminary in Lynnwood, Washington, under the title, “Apologetics and Creation.” Although delivered in August 2005, the lecture was part of the program for the Kerux Conference in May 2005. I wish to thank the Lilly Endowment through the Kaleo Center at Covenant College for a grant to research this subject. Specifically, I thank Dr. Kevin Eames, Director of the Center for Theological Exploration of the Kaleo Center, who graciously approved the grant.

Special mention and appreciation must be given to Miriam Mindeman for her excellent editorial work, comments, and suggestions on the essays appearing in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 8.

Again, thank you James Baird!

William D. Dennison
*Covenant College*
March 29, 2015
n the aftermath of orthodox Christianity’s twentieth-century conflict with theological liberalism, too few Christians now write with scholarly conviction; even fewer write with robust commitment to the Holy Scriptures and the Reformed confessions. The popular Christian response to the advances of liberal scholarship is either to retreat into the half-built fortress of fundamentalistic dogmatism, or to capitulate to modernism’s demands, even if an inch at a time. A limited number of Christian scholars have a clear vision of the truth: the best response to liberalism—and the best response to its cognates, produced as they are by the same anti-Christian spirit—is to plant oneself squarely on the foundation of the inerrant Scriptures and the Reformed confessions, and then, on that presuppositional basis, to address the hard questions of scholarship with meticulous research and serious reflection. This procedure was implemented by the greats of the Reformed tradition, and it is the superior route toward which Dr. William D. Dennison has worked hard to encourage Christians.

_In Defense of the Eschaton_ is an anthology of Dr. Dennison’s most valuable essays on the Reformed apologetics of Cornelius Van Til, all of which carry the mark of being written with Dr. Dennison’s erudite Reformed confessionalism. The essays in this book do not comprise all of Dr. Dennison’s writings on apologetics—much less do they comprise all of his writings! He has published on a variety of topics, including biblical theology, practical theology, interdisciplinary studies, and intellectual history. A strong argument could be made that, since Van Til’s thought has influenced the full scope of Dr. Dennison’s scholarship, all of Dr. Dennison’s other essays should be added to this anthology. Such additions would turn this book into a hefty tome, indeed. My aim for this anthology, however, is for readers to glean a deeper
understanding of Van Til's Reformed apologetic method from Dr. Dennison's exegesis and research. I have attempted to make up for the absence of Dr. Dennison's other writings by including after the general bibliography, a bibliography of his published materials, excluding the essays herein republished.

I have edited the component essays of this volume (some more heavily than others), but I have made no attempt to interweave the chapters. Each essay stands alone with its own particular goals and motives. Nonetheless, common themes join the chapters together, as they are vital participants in Dr. Dennison's overarching project to elucidate, apply, and extend Van Til's thought. My hope is that, as Dr. Dennison's project comes to expression in this volume, readers will gain a greater appreciation of the redemptive-historical structure of a truly biblical defense of the Christian faith.

I would like to thank the respective editors of New Horizons, the Westminster Theological Journal, the Mid-America Journal of Theology, the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Kerux, the Calvin Theological Journal, and the Ordained Servant, as well as the Committee for the Historian of the OPC and P&R Publishing for kindly granting us permission to use the articles herein republished. I am especially grateful to Dr. Lane G. Tipton for his foreword and to Dr. Mark A. Garcia for his preface. I am obliged to Wipf and Stock Publishers and to Matthew Wimer for his wonderful assistance in the publication process. Thanks are in order to Anna Baird, Nate Groelsema, Vierow Lynn Weber, my great friend Thomas Buiter, and my patient wife, Georgia, for their assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication. I am indebted to John Holberg and Tom Horn for their help in compiling the bibliography, and to Miriam Mindeman for her extensive and exceptional editing.

My last word of thanks goes to Dr. Dennison for his abounding trust, encouragement, and generosity. Dr. Dennison, I regard you as my esteemed teacher. To work alongside you on such a substantial project has been a true privilege—an honor I will never forget.

The remainder of this introduction is a synopsis of Dr. Dennison's published reflections on Reformed apologetic methodology and related topics. Rather than seeking to capture Dr. Dennison's thought comprehensively, the following is intended only to highlight the primary contours of his apologetic endeavors in order to orient readers and provide them with perspective on the subsequent chapters.
William D. Dennison initiated his academic career as a Reformed apologist with his ThM thesis, *Paul’s Two-Age Construction: Its Significance for Apologetics.* His basic argument in that work has set the trajectory for his scholarship up to the present: Paul teaches that a unique mindset is implanted into believers upon their union with Christ, and Paul persistently harkens back to that implanted mindset when issuing imperatives for believer’s thought-lives (see Col 3:1–4). In union with Jesus Christ, believers are remade to think in a certain way, and believers are called to think in this way for the sake of Christ. Although this biblical way of thinking may be given various labels, Dennison has appropriately titled it *eschatological.* By using the term *eschatology,* Dennison emphasizes that, if Christians are to think biblically, they must think in a way that is principally shaped not by abstract systematic categories, but rather by the epochal structure of redemptive history as set forth in Scripture. Paul was mentally drawn up into the progressive unfolding of the triune God’s plan; as Dennison argues, so should we be drawn up, especially when confronting the challenges of unbelief.

According to the Apostle Paul’s eschatology, there are two historic aeons that comprise two radically distinct world-and-life views for their respective participants. The believer has been united by faith to the resurrected and ascended Christ. As a result, the believer has been lifted into the heavenly world to come; he has been placed in the *eschaton.* The unbeliever, however, is united by nature to the fallen first man, Adam. The unbeliever is consequently bound to the carnal pattern of life inherent in this present evil age. Apologetics, in Dennison’s view, is not about a casual exchange of ideas over coffee or the presentation of the rational ground of Christian belief—or, for that matter, an explanation of why belief in God does not require propositional evidence to be rational. The apologist may use these tactics while in dialogue with his unbelieving friend, as long as he keeps in mind the antithesis between their two respective ways of thinking. The believer is insolubly united to the heavenly Christ. His thinking is not defined by a so-called “neutral” use of reason and experience, but instead by a heart filled to the brim with glorified life. The unbeliever, on the other

1. This thesis is now published with Wipf and Stock as *Paul’s Two-Age Construction and Apologetics.*
2. Ibid., 27–53.
3. See Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God.”
Introduction

hand, is a slave to sin in active rebellion against his Creator. The believer must, then, confront the unbeliever as one offering intellectual, moral, and religious life to the willfully and helplessly dead. Apologetics is above all else a testimony and defense of the hope and life in Christ. Because this testimony and defense is given by the believer who is in heaven to the unbeliever who is of the earth, the nature of the apologetic dialogue will be one of radical conflict grounded in two definitively diverging starting points. For the believer to begin interacting with the unbeliever from a neutral starting point is tantamount to giving up his heavenly position in Christ; so Dennison states, “My hope is that the church will establish itself with Paul in the eschaton.”

Dennison’s eschatological approach to apologetics has strong affinity (if not identity) with the presuppositional approach of Cornelius Van Til. Dennison has frequently claimed that he never intended to be original; his goal has been to be more consistently Calvinistic than Van Til—or, if you will, to be more Van Tilian than Van Til himself. Hence, Dennison has devoted a major portion of his apologetic corpus to elaborating the redemptive-historical structure of Van Til’s Reformed apologetic. Recently, K. Scott Oliphint has proposed a renaming of Van Til’s apologetic approach from presuppositional to covenantal. This name change corroborates Dennison’s contention that the primary thrust of Van Til’s apologetic is not speculatively philosophical, but rather biblically eschatological. In Dennison’s estimation, the genius of Van Til was his programmatic attack on unbelieving thought-systems, a confrontation that issued out of his starting point in the self-attesting Christ of redemptive revelation. According to Dennison, Van Til essentially taught that the heavenly world-and-life view secured and required by the believer’s union with Christ supplies the believer with everything needed to engage the world of unbelief properly. Dennison’s writings on apologetics have thus sought to establish the connection between Van Til’s apologetic and the biblical theology of Van Til’s most beloved professor, Geerhardus Vos.

Dennison has also aptly shown how Vos’s insight into the nature of revelation deeply shaped Van Til’s view of human understanding. The

5. See, for example, chapter 2, chapter 6, and chapter 7 below.
6. See Oliphint, Covenantal Apologetics.
7. See chapter 8 below.
Influence of Vos on Van Til can be seen in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, where Van Til states the following:

In paradise . . . God revealed his will with respect to the Tree of Good and Evil. Man could not know from nature itself nor from himself in relation to nature that the result of eating from the Tree of Good and Evil would spell his death. . . . It had to be a direct communication of thought content on the part of God to man. . . . We may speak of this revelation as supernatural in opposition to natural. . . .

It is this revelation that Dr. Vos speaks of as pre-redemptive, special revelation. . . . It is of prime importance to observe that even in paradise man was never meant to study nature by means of observation and experiment without connection with positive supernatural thought communication given to him by God. Nature could not be observed for what it actually is except in relation to history, and history cannot be seen for what it is at any stage except it be viewed in relation to its final end. And only by direct supernatural revelation could man have an adequate notion of this end.8

Van Til’s point in this passage is that even when we engage in simple observations of the physical universe, we are designed by God to understand his creation in light of himself and his one great plan of redemption, as fulfilled in the eschatological person and work of Jesus Christ, and as inerrantly revealed in Holy Scripture. Van Til, in *Common Grace and the Gospel*, puts the issue this way: “Natural revelation must not be separated from this supernatural revelation. To separate the two is to deal with two abstractions instead of with one concrete situation.”9

Dennison has supplied additional exegetical support from Paul’s letter to the Romans for the Vos-Van Til idea that natural revelation and special revelation are organically intertwined.10 According to Dennison’s investigations, Paul teaches that the invisible things of God—invisible things we ordinarily categorize as belonging to special revelation—are made known in the natural world by God’s triune activity (Rom 1:19–20). For example, the entire creation proclaims the redemptive work of Christ by following in his footsteps—by being humiliated in expectation of the glorification of God’s elect (Rom 8:19–23; 10:18; cf. Col 1:23). Dennison’s conclusion is

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10. See chapter 8 below.
that the apologist must not begin to convince the unbeliever of the truth of Christianity by appealing to the natural world or natural reason, as if natural revelation can be correctly understood without being brought together with special revelation; for, to begin abstractly in this way is to deny the Christian truth for which the apologist means to contend.

Another focus of Dennison’s writings on apologetics is Christian education, a favored topic shared with Van Til. In education, believers are required to learn and teach the ideas of unbelievers. How can this be done consistently with the believer’s life in Christ? The answer to this question is much the same answer Dennison gave to the problem of engaging unbelievers in apologetic discussion: the subject matter of the academic disciplines must be addressed by the believer from his heavenly perspective. This means that the believer must give proper attention to the common grace insights of unbelievers while at the same time realizing that these insights must be recontextualized into a Christian world-and-life view before they can be fully accepted. The unbeliever’s hatred toward God and blindness to Spiritual things so taints his academic procedures that he suppresses the truth about God with which he is always in noetic contact as he investigates God’s world. As long as unbelievers disconnect truths about God’s creation from truths about God and his redemptive plan revealed in Scripture, their theories about reality will be wrongheaded in the strongest sense. The Christian academic must, therefore, discard those ideas that are inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture and must biblically reorient those ideas that are true but bent by the principle of death clinging to the darkened mind of the unbeliever (see 2 Cor 4:4–6). In order to burn through these ideological impurities and rework the metal of the unbeliever’s thought-system, the Christian academic must perform a transcendental analysis.

A transcendental analysis is the first step of Van Til’s transcendental argument for Christianity. Van Til taught that the Christian apologist must argue for the truth of Christianity by showing the unbeliever that only Christianity can make cogent sense of reality. This argument requires the apologist to demonstrate to the unbeliever that his unbelieving thought-system is inadequate, inevitably harmed by internal inconsistencies. Dennison contends

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11. See Van Til, Essays on Christian Education. See also chapter 4 and chapter 5 below.
12. See chapter 3 below for more on Dennison’s interpretation of Van Til’s unique conception of common grace.
13. Dennison also calls Van Til’s transcendental analysis a transcendental critique. See chapter 1 and chapter 5 below.
Introduction

that the apologist must therefore dig deep into the structure of the unbeliever’s thought-system in search of its controlling ideological commitment in order to show the unbeliever that the foundation of his thought as well as its superstructure is flawed beyond repair. Transcendental analysis is this mining into the unbeliever’s system of thought. Put in Pauline terminology, a transcendental argument is simply the Christian academic’s effort to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God,” and a transcendental analysis is his effort to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5 ESV). Without transcendental analysis, believers would consistently be taken “captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8 ESV).

Finally, the controlling incentive driving Dennison’s work in Reformed apologetics is deeply ecclesiastical: Dennison is concerned for the fidelity of Christ’s church. In the marketplace of ideas, the lies of Satan tempt believers to compromise their commitment to the Word of God. To aid the laity in their battle against the Devil, Dennison has worked hard to convey Van Til’s biblical defense of the faith at a more understandable level.14 On the other hand, Dennison’s profound interest in the health of the church has also motivated him to interrogate Reformed scholarship, critically examining its biblical, confessional, and academic astuteness.15 Most central to Dennison’s writings, then, is his call for believers (laity, pastors, and academics alike) to be epistemologically self-conscious—that is, to live faithful thought-lives in Christ. In its essence, Dennison’s work in Reformed apologetics is an exhortation for believers as they sojourn through this foolish and evil world—to cling to their Savior by faith and to rely on the might of his heavenly wisdom.

James Douglas Baird
Lookout Mountain, GA
May 2015

14. See, for example, chapter 1 and chapter 3 below.
15. See, for example, chapter 9, chapter 10, and chapter 11 below.
# Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>CTJ</td>
<td>Calvin Theological Journal</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Christian Reformed Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>JHMTH</td>
<td>Journal for the History of Modern Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<td>JIS</td>
<td>Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
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<td>NH</td>
<td>New Horizons</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPC</td>
<td>Orthodox Presbyterian Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPCK</td>
<td>Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TZ</td>
<td>Theologische Zeitschrift</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCF</td>
<td>Westminster Confession of Faith</td>
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<td>WTJ</td>
<td>Westminster Theological Journal</td>
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Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

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. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

— 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 ESV
PART 1

Van Til Studies
Van Til’s Critique of Human Thought

Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is.
—Cornelius Van Til, A Survey of Christian Epistemology

Educators have always been concerned with how information transfers from the teacher to the pupil. Specifically, does the student acquire a sufficient understanding of a subject in order to apply it to life? Over the years, students have voiced this concern with regard to Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987)—they find his language difficult to understand and difficult to apply to apologetic situations.

One reason for this is that they are not trained in philosophy. Even so, their failure to comprehend and apply Van Til’s philosophical language has not diminished their enthusiasm for his apologetic starting point, which is the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. For them, the authority of God’s Word and the preeminence of Jesus Christ transcend their ignorance of philosophy. They know that the apologist is not to compromise the Christ of Scripture with any principle or system of secularization! Even if Van Til’s
philosophical language is unclear, his students support his initial commitment to the gospel found in the infallible Word of God.

These students, while applauding Van Til's starting point, struggle to apply the truth of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture to secular thought, Christian thought, and their own thought. Perhaps their efforts are impeded once again by Van Til's philosophical language, for he asks them to employ the “transcendental critique.” For Van Til, this critique is the method of examining a principle or system of thought in order to uncover the central presupposition (idea, belief, Archimedean point) that shapes it. In this case, the term transcendental refers to the one principle that is foundational to the whole system of belief. For Christians committed to Van Til's apologetic, that basic principle is the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. Non-Christians offer such principles as reason, experience, imagination, power, and dialectic. Contrary to what many think, the basis for Van Til's transcendental critique is not obscure or theoretical. His critique of human thought merely employs Christ's teaching that out of the heart flow the issues of life (cf. Matt 12:34–35; 15:18–19; Mark 7:21; Luke 12:34; 16:15). By participating in Christ's words, the apologist is to uncover and expose the heart of humanity. For Van Til, no one is exempt from this critical analysis. The transcendental critique reveals the deep roots of sin in the heart of man, and it demands the purity of biblical truth in the church as well as in the individual Christian.

**HOW IT WORKS**

How does the transcendental critique work? Let us say, for example, that I believe that discussion (negotiation) and experience can resolve all disputes between nations. The transcendental critique attempts to figure out why I hold that position. As you begin your analysis of my thought, as a Christian apologist, you must have a self-conscious understanding of God's revelation from Genesis to Revelation. Specifically, you must participate self-consciously in Christ's message to the church (the Bible) as you attempt to disclose the foundation (root) of my system. By your participation in the biblical text, theory and practice are brought together. With a biblical consciousness of God's revelatory truth in place, you are ready to begin your analysis and critique of my thought.

Your transcendental critique functions like a drill penetrating the earth in order to find coal. You begin at the surface—with the statement
Van Til’s Critique of Human Thought

that I have placed before you. The drilling process begins by asking questions graciously in order to uncover the various layers of my thought (1 Pet 3:15–16). A drill removes layers of dirt and rock as it makes its way to the coal; likewise, you will ask me questions that reveal the layers or “structures” of my thought as you make your way toward my most fundamental belief. In Van Til’s apologetic, this part of the transcendental critique is known as “structural analysis.” For example, your questioning should reveal that one of the structures of my thought is the belief that people are basically good. Moreover, you should discover my belief that people desire to live at peace with one another.

**PRESUPPOSITIONS**

With these structures before us, the question remains: why do I hold these beliefs? At this point, the drill seems to be approaching the coal—my core belief. You begin to realize that my fundamental concept of human rationality dictates my convictions that people are basically good and that people wish to live in peace. You have exposed the central presupposition of my thought—the assumption that most minds embrace inherent goodness and peaceful coexistence. Diplomatic negotiations will solve conflicts between nations, in my view, because all humanity shares a common desire for goodness and peace. This concept of human rationality is my core belief.

One might react to my illustration by recalling Augustine’s (354–430 AD) conception of man as the image of God. In his *City of God*, Augustine writes that man’s goodness and desire for peace are central elements of that image. So, is my view of human rationality secular or Christian? At this point, the Christian apologist has to be very perceptive as he applies the transcendental critique to the structures of my thought. He has to connect the dots of each response that I give to his questions. Moreover, he is responsible to construct my worldview honestly as I disclose any various beliefs. That is, the apologist must endeavor to understand his opponent’s position better than his opponent understands it.

In our example, let us say that as your investigation advances toward my core belief, it becomes apparent that the tenets of modernity shape my view of rationality—for example, I do not believe in God, and I do not accept the biblical view that man is God’s image. Neither the Bible nor Augustine is determining my understanding of the role of goodness and peace in the arena of diplomacy. Rather, enlightened humanism, as it came to
expression in John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), has conditioned my conceptions of goodness and peace.

In his essay *On Liberty* (1859), Mill sounded the alarm that the majority could become tyrannical in a democratic state. In order to prevent this abuse of power, Mill maintained that people must put all differences aside and appeal to the collective constitution of human reason. By doing this, all parties (majority and minority) are capable of resolving their problems through “discussion and experience.” They can be confident that rational discourse will easily resolve all conflicts, as each party invokes the experience of history and human collectivity. Mill’s position is dependent on what he calls the “quality” and “respectability” of the human mind to construct an intellectual and moral society—that is, a society that is dependent on the goodness of man, and man’s ability to create an environment of peace and harmony. If Mill’s political philosophy is embraced and executed, then the biblical doctrine of man’s fall into sin must be rejected, and the realization of a human utopia seems to be placed within man’s grasp. For those committed to classic democratic liberalism, Mill’s principle of utility—“discussion and experience”—became the solution to all human conflict.

**COUNTERARGUMENTS**

After the Christian apologist has uncovered the central presupposition of his opponent, he is in a position to move on to the next step: to demonstrate that his opponent cannot live consistently from his presupposition(s). Keep in mind that, according to Van Til, apologetics is not a battle between competing presuppositions. The object of apologetics is not to show that my presupposition is better than your presupposition. Rather, for the Christian apologist, the presupposition of the absolute authority and truth of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture calls all men to repentance and faith in Christ as their presuppositions and systems of thought are brought into the open. For Van Til, there is an *antithesis* between the Christian presupposition and all other presuppositions.

To see this, let us return to our illustration. Two examples are sufficient to show the folly of the secular view of rationality that I espoused (Mill’s view). First, we know that dictators and tyrants have invoked Machiavelli’s (1469–1527) *The Prince* in order to justify their evil behavior. History is full of instances in which “discussion and experience” had no impact as these ruthless “princes” terminated the lives of millions. Second, since my
(Mill's) perspective of utopian idealism is grounded in the Enlightenment's view that rationality would lead to the cessation of war, its folly is exposed by the two world wars of the twentieth century—and the continuing strife of our day. Although many continue to give blind allegiance to this ideal, there is no evidence, as we enter the twenty-first century, that “discussion and experience” will pacify man's evil quest for power over others.

By using these counterarguments, the Christian apologist has shown the absurdity of my core belief and my inability to apply my view of rationality to the affairs of humanity consistently. The counterarguments affirm the antithetical instruction of the Psalmist to put no confidence in princes. Instead, we are to put our confidence in the sovereign providence of God, who has reserved the inheritance of the nations for his Son (Pss 2:1–12; 118:9; 146:3). The apologist will place before his rival this statement of the Psalmist in the hope of seeing repentance and faith in Christ.

I want you to learn from my illustration that it is not necessary to know someone's thought thoroughly in order to critique it. I tried to demonstrate this point by not revealing Mill's name until the transcendental critique had uncovered his basic presupposition. In other words, my aim was to show that a competent understanding of Van Til's critique is sufficient for pastors and laymen to expose the starting point and structures of a rival's thought. A competent use of the critique does not require knowledge of the history of philosophy. I attempted to show that knowledge of the history of philosophy will add context and substance to the critique, but such knowledge is not imperative for the pastor or layman. Indeed, competency in the method enables one to combat effectively the secular presuppositions of the world, as well as to withstand the invasion of secularism into Christ's church and the believer's life.

CHRISTIAN SELF-ANALYSIS

Although my example is from the arena of secular thought, I do not want to overlook the responsibility of the church and the believer to employ the method in self-analysis. For a church that proclaims the truth of the gospel, and for the believer who loves Christ, apologetics is not only the defending of the Christ of Scripture from the world, but also the constant cleansing of our union with Christ from the pollution of sinful thought. Through the power of Christ's Spirit, we are to live out our self-conscious identity in Christ (Gal 2:20). As pastors prepare to preach, the transcendental method
will need to be employed. As the church makes decisions about her philosophy of ministry, the method will need to be employed. As believers watch TV, view a film, read a book, counsel a friend, listen in the classroom, and hear a political candidate, the method will need to be employed. Simply put, the church, the pastor, and the believer must critically analyze everything that passes through the brain. As the Holy Spirit maintains our participation in the self-attesting Christ of Scripture, such analysis thwarts the evil one!