

Van Til's thought is as beautiful and complex as an old European city. In order to explore the depth of what the city has to offer, one needs a map. Lane Tipton's *Introduction to the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* offers an invaluable map of Van Til's thought. His work fills a much-needed gap in the literature for a short, clear introduction to Van Til. Students new to Van Til's presuppositional method will find his system far more accessible if they first take up Tipton's book. Even the more experienced reader will find much to deepen their knowledge of Van Til.

Scott Cook, Pastor of Oconee PCA, Seneca, SC, and Visiting Professor of Apologetics, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Greenville, SC

Dr. Lane Tipton has become the foremost spokesman of the encyclopedic thought and work of the premiere Reformed Christian apologist of the twentieth century, Cornelius Van Til. What separates Tipton's understanding of Van Til is how he grasps Van Til's biblical and orthodox understanding of the Trinity as well as the Creator-creature relationship as the penetrating principles to formulate, interpret the content, and analyze the rubrics of systematic theology, the progressive revelation of a full-orbed Vosian biblical theology, and provide a critical examination of the history of philosophy. Tipton's clarity in presenting Van Til's thought makes one wonder how anyone who is seriously committed to historic biblical orthodoxy as summarized in the ecumenical creeds and the Reformed confessions could argue against the spectrum of Van Til's thought. Tipton's volume is a **MUST** read for any student or even a critic of Van Til's position. Tipton masterfully clears the air of the many misconceptions of Van Til's thought if one has ears to listen and understand (e.g., the antithesis, common grace, idealism). Engage to understand!

William D. Dennison, Professor Emeritus of Interdisciplinary Studies, Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, GA, and Pastor of Emmanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Kent, WA

Cornelius Van Til has been the subject of both advocacy and criticism among the Reformed ever since his emergence as a premier Reformed apologist. However, a proper synthesis of his apologetics and theology has evaded both friend and foe. In my estimation there has not been a proper retrieval process of Van Til until now. Lane G. Tipton offers what I believe to be the clearest, most penetrating exposition of the thought of Van Til both in terms of Van Til's theology and apologetics. Van Til's prime directive has been to advance Reformed Trinitarianism and Reformed federalism organically and offer to the church a comprehensive alternative to all forms of correlativism and mutualism. Many of Van Til's most ardent proponents have failed to advance Van Til's thought without deviating from Van Til's insistence on the self-contained nature of the triune God and the representational principle related to image and covenant. For these reasons, I cannot commend the work of my friend and mentor Lane G. Tipton more highly. *Introduction to the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* is a must read for all serious students of Reformed Apologetics.

Emilio Ramos, Founder of Red Grace Media

During my years at Westminster Theological Seminary in the late 1970s, many of us would speak of four stages of conversion: our saving call to faith in Jesus Christ, our coming to the Reformed faith, our learning biblical theology, and our exposure to presuppositional apologetics through the works of Cornelius Van Til. This rich volume by Dr. Lane Tipton brought back all those memories in something of a second blessing! The book grew out of Dr. Tipton's inaugural course in the Fellowship of Reformed Apologetics initiated by Reformed Forum and is, indeed, a "thumbnail sketch of more advanced material to follow."

This little volume is masterful theology as explained by a masterful teacher. As it is intended to be, it is a "roadmap" to understand Cornelius Van Til, his Reformed theology and apologetics, and his challenge to all lesser forms of Christianity than the historic Reformed faith. Let these pages wash over you and challenge you afresh to stand for and to proclaim "the self-authenticating Christ of Scripture."

Bill Shishko, Senior Pastor of The Haven at Commack (OPC), Long Island, NY

Dr. Tipton's work serves as a fine general introduction to Van Til. But it's more than that. Though a short book, it's helpful even to advanced students of Van Til as well as Van Til's opponents, addressing as it does controversial points within his theology, including his apologetics, and showing Van Til's genius in the treatment of them. Lane's careful and able exposition of Van Til, especially considering Thomistic, Barthian, and idealist approaches broadly, is most timely and welcome.

Alan Strange, Interim President, Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, IN, and Pastor of First Church of South Holland (OPC), South Holland, IL

"Van Til remained first and foremost a Reformed Trinitarian theologian." This is Tipton's thesis in his *Introduction to the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*. It is timely and crucial. As one who believes that Van Til's development of presuppositionalism is one of the most important theological developments of the 20th century, it is heartbreaking to see how he has been both misused by his supposed followers and misunderstood and misrepresented by his adversaries. Both such followers and such opponents of presuppositionalism have left the impression that somehow Van Til departed from Reformed orthodoxy. It is about time someone set the record straight. Tipton's volume is, therefore, crucially important. I commend it to anyone who wants to know the truth about Van Til. That truth is, as Tipton shows, that Van Til's teaching is grounded and controlled in the mighty orthodoxy of Herman Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos. Any impression to the contrary is the fault of those who have misused and misrepresented him. I heartily commend Tipton's work.

Sam Waldron, President and Professor of Systematic Theology of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary, Owensboro, KY

INTRODUCTION TO
THE THEOLOGY AND
APOLOGETICS OF
CORNELIUS VAN TIL

LANE G. TIPTON



REFORMED
FORUM

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ABBREVIATIONS

WCF Westminster Confession of Faith
WSC Westminster Shorter Catechism

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK EMERGES from the inaugural course in the Fellowship in Reformed Apologetics, a program initiated by Reformed Forum to offer foundational training in the tradition of Cornelius Van Til. This initial course and this companion volume cater to a diverse range of learners, from those without formal theological education to advanced research scholars. It provides some biographical and historical information that sets Van Til in the context of his academic and theological development.

The courses and books in this series to follow this introduction will offer more advanced teaching designed thoroughly to equip those interested in the Reformed theology and presuppositional apologetics of Van Til. This book, then, is not an introduction to Van Til's apologetic *per se* but instead provides a thumbnail sketch of the more advanced course material to follow in the fellowship.

Van Til stands out in the twentieth century as a theologian who sought consistently to apply Reformed Trinitarianism and federalism, as taught in Scripture and summarized in the Westminster Standards, to the defense of Christian theism. His theology and apologetic remain underappreciated and often misunderstood in the twenty-first century due to a number of factors addressed in this series.

This introductory volume offers a bird's eye overview of his system of thought in chapters that survey his education, publications throughout his teaching career (ch. 1), the doctrine of the Trinity and a Christian philosophy of history (ch. 2), his doctrine of the Creator-creature distinction and relation (ch. 3), his integration of general and special revelation in one grand scheme of covenantal condescension (ch. 4), his theology of common grace (ch. 5), his biblical theology of sin and antithesis (ch. 6), his understanding of evidence as it relates to apologetical method (ch. 7), and his robust rejection of correlativism that lies at the heart of Kantian and Hegelian expressions of idealism (ch. 8).

While this book does not deal exhaustively with his entire system of theology and apologetics as found in the volumes to follow, it supplies a basic roadmap to help readers begin to grasp the wide-ranging character of his theology and apologetic. Let us turn to a brief summary of his system of theology and apologetics that previews the chapters to follow in this book.

Van Til maintained consistently throughout his writing and teaching career that the ontological Trinity—God as the absolute and immutable Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—forges our interpretive concept everywhere. He insisted that the triune God remains immutably absolute in his sovereignly willed relation to creation and in his special act of providential condescension to Adam in the covenant of works. He maintained the immutability of the person of Jesus Christ as incarnate and rejected “commingling” the eternal and the temporal in the incarnation. He sought to apply Reformed Trinitarianism and federalism (or the system of Reformed covenant theology) to every species of theology and philosophy that departed from them by either recasting God as a participant in creational change (front-door mutualism of modernism and Barthianism) or reconceiving man as a participant in the divine being (back-door mutualism of traditional Roman Catholicism). The Reformed doctrines of the Trinity, image of God, covenantal

condescension, and the immutable person of the incarnate Mediator shape and structure Van Til's theological apologetic.

He argued further that Reformed federalism—the theology of the image of God and the covenant of works—lays the groundwork for a Reformed philosophy of history. Van Til followed traditional Reformed teaching that God created Adam in natural religious fellowship with himself. In the work of special creation, God gifted Adam with original righteousness, holiness, and knowledge, and in the work of special providence, God entered into a covenant of works with Adam. These two distinct acts are synchronous as far as Adam was concerned—the one never existing in time apart from the other. The Spirit who conferred such natural gifts in special creation supernaturally sustained such gifts in the image-bearing creature as he existed in covenant relation to God. Van Til followed particularly Vos's doctrine of the deeper Protestant conception of the image of God and the covenant of works as distinct yet simultaneous aspects of God's relation to Adam as he developed his Reformed doctrine of the Creator-creature relation and set that doctrine over against both traditional Roman Catholicism and Barthianism.

Van Til's embrace of Reformed federalism—the Reformed doctrines of the image of God and the covenant of works—offered something that cannot be found in traditional Roman Catholic theology or in Barthianism. Rather than knowledge beginning with sensible objects alone and then attaining the knowledge of God by an inferential pattern of reasoning that traces back to a supernatural cause (traditional Thomistic natural theology), Van Til followed Calvin and insisted that the natural knowledge of God was concreated in Adam and given along with his existence, and that such natural knowledge never existed for a moment in time apart from God's special revelation in the terms of the covenant of works. God related to Adam in one grand scheme of natural and special revelation that was never separate in time as far as Adam

was concerned. Van Til termed this a “revelational epistemology,” which stood over against all views that teach the natural knowledge of God is acquired only by inferential reasoning that begins with the knowledge of sensible objects alone.

Van Til also taught a Reformed doctrine of sin and depravity that flowed from his theology of Adam as the image of God and federal head of the race. Adam’s original sin against God consisted in his loss of original righteousness, the guilt of his first sin, and the corruption of his whole nature. Adam did not merely suffer a weakening of his goodness as taught by Thomas Aquinas and traditional Roman Catholic theology. Rather, his entire nature—intellect, will, and affections—was corrupted by the fall and enslaved to sin. Adam and his posterity therefore suppress the truth of God concreated and natural as image bearers and deny the truth specially revealed (in the covenant of works, in the person and work of Christ, and in Scripture), leading to an ethical antithesis between those who worship and serve the Creator and those who worship and serve the creature (Rom. 1:18ff.).

The only hope of Adam and Eve and their fallen posterity emerges in God’s special revelation of the Redeemer in a second covenant—the covenant of grace. God promised Adam, Eve, and all of the seed of the woman a Redeemer who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15), offer himself as a substitute and sacrifice for his people and clothe them in his own image (v. 21), pass under the flaming sword and ascend the mountain of the Lord (vv. 23–24) so that he would be the Lord of the living who trust in him (v. 20). In light of the radical consequences of the fall, God gives common grace—favor of any degree, short of salvation, that God shows to the sin-cursed world to enable the outworking of his great gospel promise. As God gathers and perfects his people from the four corners of the world through the preaching of the gospel first announced in Eden (vv. 15–24), he gives common grace that restrains sin and serves the gospel of

God's Son. Common grace serves the gospel, accents the antithesis between belief and unbelief, and provides a context for the outworking of the covenant of grace that offers Christ to sinners for salvation and life.

This leads Van Til to set Christian theism—its doctrine of God, covenant theology, and philosophy of history that culminates in the immutable person and historical work of Christ—over against all forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life. Reformed Trinitarianism and federalism offer a robust doctrine of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace that challenges unbelief at its root. It centers not the incarnation (Aquinas) or a primordial Christ-event in *Geschichte* (Barth) but instead the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ crucified and raised supplies central redemptive-historical reality that must be both proclaimed and defended in light of the whole of God's counsel as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the creeds and Reformed confessions of the church.

Speaking of the centrality of the resurrection and its bearing on apologetical method, Van Til insisted that the apologist present the fact and the meaning of the resurrection of Christ *together* in light of the one grand history of general and special revelation. He further insisted that the gospel of Jesus Christ—his death and resurrection (Rom. 1:3–4; 1 Cor. 15:3–4)—be presented as the central redemptive reality within the framework of the covenantally coordinated general and special revelation of the triune God. He further insisted that when Paul argued for the resurrection of Christ in Acts 17, he “was not interested in having them endorse the Resurrection as an isolated event. . . . He was, rather, concerned that they accept it as the climax of the work of redemption from sin by Jesus, truly God and truly man. . . . In short, men should not existentially accept the resurrection unless, in doing so, they received it as part of the entire biblical redemptive

framework.”¹ Van Til therefore maintained strenuously that the evidential function of Jesus’s bodily resurrection from the dead is “proof” of final judgment for the reprobate and the securing of eternal salvation for the elect.

Van Til, then, advocated against a “block-house” method when defending Christian theism. Such a method argues for theism and Christianity independently. Traditional Roman Catholic apologetics denies concreated natural knowledge of God, begins with sensible objects, and reasons inferentially to the existence of God as the first supernatural cause (theism). From that foundation, it then presents the supernatural truths of revelation in the Christian religion (Christianity). This method reasons from the natural truths discovered by reason alone to the supernatural truths discovered by revelation. Van Til termed this a “block-house” method that did not cohere with a Reformed doctrine of Adam created as the image of God with concreated natural knowledge of God, on the one hand, and given the distinct yet simultaneous terms of special revelation in the covenant of works as federal head, on the other hand. Rather than using a block-house method, Van Til set forth Christian theism as a unit, rooted in God’s unified scheme of natural and special revelation—a hallmark of the Creator-creature relation as understood within Reformed federalism.

Van Til’s doctrine of common grace supplies a much needed and underappreciated aspect of his theology and apologetic. The Holy Spirit makes the gospel proclamation and defense of Christian theism effective for the salvation of the elect by saving grace, even as he will enable the gospel to go forth in preaching to all as he restrains sin by common grace. For Van Til, common grace supplies a distinctively Reformed philosophy of history and enables the theologian and apologist to be fearlessly anthropomorphic. The immutable triune God relates without change to history and

1. Cornelius Van Til, *Who Do You Say I Am?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1975), 8.

gives its meaning from creation to consummation. Common grace enabled Van Til to express the truths that the acts of the immutable triune God fall in time without making God mutable and that God's eternal and immutable decree gives meaning and authenticity to the contingent creature in history. Fearless anthropomorphism stands directly over against pantheism that teaches a literal doctrine of change in God as he relates to creation—a view that destroys the Reformed doctrine of anthropomorphism by submerging both God and the creature in a process of becoming.

Finally, Van Til set Reformed Trinitarianism and federalism over against all forms of correlativism—ranging from the teaching that God and the world are submerged in a mutual change given God's condescension to relate to the world (front-door mutualism as found in Barthianism and contemporary evangelicalism) or the teaching that the rational is ontologically repositioned above his created nature by supernatural grace to participate in the essence of God in the divine processions (back-door mutualism as found in Thomas Aquinas and traditional Roman Catholicism). Stated in terms of his rejection of philosophical correlativism, Van Til rejected all forms of idealism—whether subjective, transcendental, or absolute. Van Til especially critiqued and rejected the absolute idealism of his day (American, English, and German) because it construed the “absolute” as both determined by and changed in its relation to space and time. Over against such correlativistic or pantheistic constructions of the idealists, Van Til insisted that the triune God remains at every point self-sufficient, independent, and immutable in his freely willed relation to creation, and that only such a God accounts for the revelational environment in which rational creatures live and move and have their being.

This broad summary of Van Til's system of theology and apologetics serves as an introduction to the introduction, as it were, provided in this short volume. The topics summarized above appear within the pages of this volume. This book then offers an expansion

of these central themes in Van Til's theology and apologetics. A complete curriculum comprised of eight on-demand video courses are available for free at reformedforum.org. Each course in this series significantly expands each topic covered in this introductory volume.