

## Shot through with Personality: Establishing Man's Freedom within the Sovereign Plan of God

By Daniel Ragusa

### Introduction

#### 1. THE COVENANTAL FRAMEWORK OF THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Written at the entrance of the temple of Reformed theology are the words: "God does not exist because of man, but man because of God."<sup>1</sup> This Reformed principle of a relentless commitment to the preeminence of God's glory—what Geerhardus Vos called Scripture's "deepest root idea"—found its most natural expression in covenant theology.<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Van Til went so far as to say, "Covenant theology is Reformed theology."<sup>3</sup> For "only covenant theology gives all the glory to God, and without giving all the glory to God there is no true religion."<sup>4</sup> This covenantal schema is embodied in what B. B. Warfield called "the ripest fruit of Reformed creed-making," the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF).<sup>5</sup>

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1. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos: Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 242.

2. Vos considers three implications of this Reformed principle that substantiate this claim—the third of which will coincide with the concern of Cornelius Van Til, which we will take up later: "When this principle is applied to man and his relationship to God, it immediately divides into three parts: 1. All of man's works has to rest on an antecedent work of God; 2. In all of his works man has to show forth God's image and be a means for the revelation of God's virtues; 3. The latter should not occur unconsciously or passively, but the revelation of God's virtues must proceed by way of understanding and will and by way of the conscious life, and actively come to external expression" ("The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," 242). Van Til

This should come as no surprise for the Westminster divines were wholly committed to the glory of God as the chief end of man and self-consciously began with Scripture as their *principium cognoscendi*<sup>6</sup>—the two ingredients necessary for covenant theology. So, as Vos observed, "The Westminster Confession is the first Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but placed in the foreground and has been able to permeate at almost every point."<sup>7</sup> Likewise Warfield is well-known for writing, "The architectonic principle of the Westminster Confession is supplied by the schematization of the Federal theology, which had obtained by this time in Britain, as on the Continent, a dominant position as the most commodious mode of presenting the *corpus* of Reformed doctrine."<sup>8</sup> The covenant, then, is not a disparate chapter in the confession, but the structural framework around which the entire confession is built, manifesting a commitment to the glory of God above all else.<sup>9</sup>

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will appeal to this passage from Vos to establish the Reformed view on the relationship between the Absolute personality of God and the finite covenant personality of man (see "The Will in its Theological Relations," 46). Cf. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:23.

3. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, second edition, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 271. From now on *IST*.

4. Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, n.a.), 98. From now on *SCE*. Elsewhere he writes, "All true religion is covenant religion and is based upon this name of God [*Jehovah*] as the one who is unchangeable in his attitude of saving grace to his people" (*IST*, 321).

5. B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (1932; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991), 58.

6. Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), chapter 1.

7. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," 239.

8. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 56.

9. Anthony Hoekema writes, "The doctrine of the covenant of grace is ... the vertebrate structure which holds all the doctrines of Reformed theology together" (*Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the*

## 2. WCF 3.1, THE COVENANT, AND VAN TIL'S REPRESENTATIONAL PRINCIPLE

The above context will be vital for the focus of this paper in understanding the way in which the confession relates God's absolute sovereignty to human freedom without falling into the rationalism of either fatalism or deism in chapter 3 ("Of God's Eternal Decree"). The divines' treatment of ultimate and second causes is tied to the personal God of the covenant. The nature of the decree is not argued for on the basis of abstraction or philosophical speculation, but grounded in a biblical understanding of God as the self-sufficient and self-contained triune God (2.1–3). The confession reads,

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (3.1).

*Covenant*, 360). He also notes a similar point in the thought of Herman Bavinck who understood the doctrine of the covenant to be central to theology because it is central in Scripture. He writes, "Bavinck even goes so far as to say that, apart from the doctrine of the covenant, the Reformed creeds and the Reformed theology cannot be understood on a single point" (ibid., 69–70; see also 110, 325). To support this claim Hoekema cites Bavinck's *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* (Kampen: Zaleman, 1903), 92ff. The same point is made by Geerhardus Vos, who writes, "The relation of the redeemed to God, their Redeemer is a covenant-relation.... The entire revelation of God is dominated by this idea" (*Dogmatiek* [Grand Rapids: 1910], Vol. 1, Part II, p. 84; cited by Hoekema, 306).

10. To my knowledge the only extensive treatment of Van Til's representational principle is found in Lane Tipton, "The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til" (dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 2004). Tipton, while doing the heavy lifting in laying the foundation for constructive development of Van Til's representational principle, does not directly treat the way in which it relates to divine sovereignty and human freedom. See also Lane G. Tipton, "The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 289–306. John Frame makes brief mention of the principle, but leaves unexcavated its programmatic impact on Van Til's theology (see *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995], 58–61). Pierce Taylor Hibbs considers the representational principle and the way in which it renders *language* meaningful ("Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language," *WTJ* 78 [2016]: 299–322). Our concern in this paper is how it renders *human choices* meaningful.

11. Van Til, *SCE*, 96. The relationship between the covenant and God's triune being is found earlier in the writings of Geerhardus Vos, who had a major influence on Van Til's thought. Vos writes, "Just as the blessedness of God exists in the free relationship of the three Persons of the adorable Being, so man shall also find his blessedness in the covenantal relationship with his God.... [I]t is only in the triune Being that that perfect freedom dominates which the covenant idea appears to demand" ("The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," 245–46).

The primary question of concern is this: *How does the covenantal structure of the Westminster Confession of Faith inform its theological formulation of God's sovereignty and human freedom?* While this question could be considered from numerous vantage points, this paper will focus on the way in which Cornelius Van Til provides an answer by way of his representational principle in continuity with the theology of the confession.<sup>10</sup> His representational principle pushes us beyond a superficial and impersonal understanding of the covenant idea, for it pushes us to its most basic foundation: the self-sufficient triune God of Scripture. Van Til writes,

The *covenant idea* is nothing but the *expression* of the *representational principle* consistently applied to all reality. The *foundation* of the representational principle among men is the fact that the *Trinity* exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it.<sup>11</sup>

Notice that the covenant, according to Van Til, has an exhaustive impact on "all reality," charging the whole of it with personality. Man does not operate or make choices in a vacuum or in an atmosphere of chance—such would render his will inoperative and his choices meaningless—but in an exhaustively personalistic environment, that is, in the comprehensive plan of God. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). At all times and in all places man is *coram Deo semper*. The Trinity, in whom there is no residue of impersonality since the persons are mutually exhaustive of each other (perichoresis), provides the necessary ontological foundation for this personalistic environment, which is expressed in the covenant idea. At the heart of the covenant, then, is personal union and communion with the triune God. "I will be your God and you will be my people" is the refrain of the biblical narrative and the goal that consummates all of human history. History, therefore, is not bare or impersonal history, but covenantal history, the outworking of the sovereign purposes of the triune God unto their eschatological fulfillment.

Van Til's representational principle is a brilliant systematic move that integrates the deep contours of theology: trinity, covenant, and eschatology. *Eschatology* is the historical consummation of the *covenant idea*, which expresses the *representational principle* that is grounded in the perichoretic relations of the ontological *Trinity*. The representational principle in God, then, is the mutually exhaustive representation of the persons in each other with no residue of impersonality. This paper will

expound upon these basic points of Van Til's theology as well as make explicit their organic relationship to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

### 3. THE RELEVANCY OF THIS PAPER

Before proceeding, however, we should note the relevancy of this exploration in the confession of faith and Van Til's theology. There has been a welcomed resurgence to Reformed theology in recent years, which is a good sign of the church returning to Scripture and realizing its "root idea" of the glory of God. Unfortunately, Reformed theology is often reduced to the five points of Calvinism as found in the Canons of Dort<sup>12</sup> and so abstracted from the larger Reformed system, which is structurally covenantal. As Van Til said, "Covenant theology is Reformed theology."<sup>13</sup> Richard Muller exposes this problem well,

Calvinism or, better, Reformed teaching, as defined by the great Reformed confessions does include the so-called five points. Just as it is improper, however, to identify Calvin as the sole progenitor of Reformed theology, so also is it incorrect to identify the five points or the document from which they have been drawn, the *Canons of Dort*, as a full confession of the Reformed faith, whole and entire unto itself. In other words, it would be a major error—both historically and doctrinally—if the five points of Calvinism were understood either as the sole or even as the absolutely primary basis for identifying someone as holding the Calvinistic or Reformed faith. In fact, the *Canons of Dort* contain five points *only* because the Arminian articles, the *Remonstrance* of 1610, to which they responded, had five points. The number five, far from being sacrosanct, is the result of a particular historical circumstance and was determined *negatively* by the number of articles in the Arminian objection to confessional Calvinism.<sup>14</sup>

At least two problems arise from this. First, many have embraced the five points *abstracted from their covenantal context*. This has led to a misunderstanding of Reformed theology by its opponents and a distortion of the five points by its proponents, the former waging *accusations* of fatalism or philosophical determinism, and the latter *purporting* some species of fatalism or philosophical determinism, despite explicit objections to such conclusions. Van Til and the confession avoid these issues by means of situating the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom within its personalistic covenantal context.

Second, many have embraced the five points *purely*

*in reaction to Arminianism*, but have not escaped the fundamental rationalism of Arminianism. So while they object to Arminian conclusions they continue to operate with the same methodology and merely end up on the opposite end of the same rationalistic spectrum. Fatalism is as much rationalistic as libertarianism. It is as much a problem to rationalize away God's sovereignty as it is to rationalize away human freedom.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Van Til and the Westminster Confession operate on a different methodological spectrum entirely and are able to maintain the tension between the two equally valid biblical truths of divine sovereignty and human freedom.<sup>16</sup> Van Til will explicitly push the tension back into the Trinity in whom unity and diversity are equally ultimate, so that neither compromises the other.

### 4. THESIS

According to Van Til's representational principle, for man's will to operate and for an act of his will to be significant and meaningful it *must* take place within an exhaustively personal environment, that is, it *must* take place within the sovereign and eternal plan of the self-sufficient triune God. The absolute freedom of God does not *take away* or *limit* man's freedom, but rather *establishes* it in an analogical fashion.

#### 1. Doctrinal Backdrop: The Self-Sufficient and Self-Contained Triune God of Scripture

Along with the covenantal structure of the confession—which is the natural product of the divine's commitment to the glory of God (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q1) and God's Word as their *principium cognoscendi* (WCF 1)—we also need to take into account

12. These five points are often summarized by the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.

13. Van Til, *IST*, 271.

14. Richard A. Muller, "How Many Points?," *CTJ* 28 (1993): 426.

15. "As alone the Calvinist is concerned to oppose indeterminism at the lowest level of existence, so also he alone is concerned to oppose determinism" (Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, fourth edition, ed. K. Scott Oliphint [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008], 273). From now on *DF4*.

16. We should note here at the outset of our study that this tension exists only for finite man and not for the infinite God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa. 55:9). While the Reformed approach, particularly as it is expressed by Van Til, allows us to *maintain* this tension, it does not necessarily *resolve* it. We are still required to humble ourselves by the power of the Spirit before the revelation of God so as not to answer back to him (Rom. 9:20), but to rest in his goodness and faithfulness unto the doxological praise of his inscrutable ways and unsearchable judgments (Rom. 11:33–36).

the doctrinal backdrop erected in the second chapter (“Of God, and of the Holy Trinity”) leading up to God’s eternal decree in the third chapter. When chapter three begins with “God” as the agent of the decree it does not have in mind a vague theistic notion of God, but particularly the self-revealed triune God of Scripture. For, to echo Van Til, no other God than the God of Scripture exists: “there is but *one only*, living, and true God” (2.1).<sup>17</sup> To ascribe the decrees to any other God is to ascribe them to an un-reality, a non-existent figment of a fallen, finite mind. This, as will be shown, distorts the nature of the decree and inevitably devolves it into a kind of fatalism or philosophical necessity that takes away the freedom and contingency of secondary causes.

In this section we will first briefly consider the confession’s doctrine of God, which stands behind its formulation of God’s eternal decree, and then turn to Van Til’s formulation, which makes explicit that it is none other than the self-sufficient triune God of Scripture who is the agent of the decree—this will become foundational for his representational principle. As a point of contrast, we will conclude this section with a critique of R. C. Sproul’s formulation in his popular book *Chosen by God*.

#### 1.1 THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH ON THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

On the basis of God’s self-revelation in Scripture, the divines first speak of God *in se* as “infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, *most free*, most absolute” (2.1). Here God is considered as he is in and of himself in an absolute sense. It then considers God *pro nobis*: “working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous

will, for his own glory...” (2.1). Here God is considered relatively as he relates to his creation.

The second paragraph moves into describing “God’s ‘aseity,’ or absolute independence from all things.”<sup>18</sup>

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself *all-sufficient*, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and *hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain.* He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them (2.2).

We will continually return to this notion of the absolute independence of God in our discussion of his sovereignty in relationship to human freedom and responsibility. At the heart of our critiques of Arminianism, Lutheranism, Deism, fatalism, philosophical determinism, etc., is a most basic failure to maintain this biblical truth. As we will come to see, these formulations conceive of man’s freedom in such a way that makes God *dependent*, at least to some degree, upon the creature and to that extent depersonalize the surroundings of man, so that he operates in a void or vacuum, and introduce elements of impersonality into the triune God himself.<sup>19</sup> The absolute independence and freedom of God as established in the confession (2.2), therefore, is vital for maintaining the absolute personality of God, which, in turn, is vital for maintaining the exhaustively personal atmosphere in which *alone* man can operate and his choices be significant and meaningful.

It is not enough only to take into account Confession 2.1 and 2.2 as necessary background for understanding the decree, for 2.3, which provides a concise statement on the Trinity, is just as vital. It reads,

In the *unity* of the Godhead there be *three* persons, of *one* substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son (WCF 2.3).

17. Van Til, *DF4*, 34.

18. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2016), 33.

19. See Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R Publishing, 1955), 96–97, 121, 123, 126–27, 136, 138–39. “If God is absolute personality he is completely self-conscious. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. There are no hidden depths of troubled possibility within or beyond him. He knoweth the end from the beginning. it [sic.] is this absolute selfconsciousness of God that forms the basis of certainty for our knowledge. Possibility for us is deeper than the deepest sea. If it were so also for God the whole of our coherent experience would be adrift on a shoreless, bottomless void. Our thought would be operating in a vacuum. If there is to be any rationality or coherence anywhere there must be absolute rationality somewhere. Our rationality rests upon God’s rationality” (pp. 126–27).

We find this oversight, for example, in the work of J. V. Fesko, in which he dedicates three pages to the doctrinal backdrop in his chapter on God and the decree.<sup>20</sup> He concludes without any mention of the doctrine of the Trinity: "Understanding God's attributes, considered both absolutely and relatively, is key to the proper understanding of how the divines explain the nature of the decree."<sup>21</sup> This is problematic, for the triunity of God is not a mere appendage to our theological system, but its very heart.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it is fundamental for maintaining the absolute personality of God, which is essential for Van Til's representational principle and for avoiding species of fatalism and philosophical determinism. The confession can seamlessly bring together the unity and diversity of God in perfect harmony.

### 1.2 VAN TIL'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Van Til self-consciously initiates his entire theological and apologetic project with the self-sufficient, self-contained triune God of Scripture.

Christianity offers the triune God, the absolute personality ... as the God in whom we believe. This conception of God is the foundation of everything else that we hold dear. Unless we can believe in this sort of God, it does us no good to be told that we may believe in some other sort of God, or in anything else. For us everything depends for its meaning upon this sort of God. Accordingly we are not interested to have anyone prove to us the existence of any other sort of God but this God. Any other sort of God is no God at all, and to prove that some other sort of God exists is, in effect, to prove that no God exists.<sup>23</sup>

With this in view, Lane Tipton writes, "Reformed trinitarian theism appropriately encapsulates the theology of Cornelius Van Til."<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere Van Til echoes the language of the confession regarding God's absolute independence:

God's being is self-sufficient, his knowledge is analytical, and his will is self-referential. In his being, knowledge, and will God is *self-contained*. There is nothing correlative to him. He does not depend on his being, knowledge, or will upon the being, knowledge, or will of his own creatures. God is *absolute*. He is *autonomous*.<sup>25</sup>

In this description, Van Til has in view none other than the triune personal God of Scripture. In terms of the confession: the God of 2.2 who is *a se* is none other than the triune God of 2.3.

God exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being. *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are each a personality and together constitute the exhaustively personal God*. There is an eternal, internal self-conscious interaction between the three persons of the Godhead. They are co-substantial. Each is as much God as are the other two. The Son and the Spirit do not derive their being from the Father. *The diversity and the unity in the Godhead are therefore equally ultimate; they are exhaustively correlative to one another and not correlative to anything else*.<sup>26</sup>

From this we can make at least three observations. First, notice that "the fact that the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it," will become for Van Til "the foundation of the representational principle among men."<sup>27</sup> This will be explored in a subsequent section.

Second, it is to *this triune God* who Van Til ascribes the eternal decree and to none other. Note the way he prefaces his citation of the confession (3.3), "I further hold that *the self-sufficient triune God* 'from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeable ordain whatsoever comes to pass.'<sup>28</sup> The decree of the self-sufficient triune God *alone* can establish the liberty or contingency of second causes, for as we will see, he alone can provide the personalistic environment in which man can make significant and meaningful choices. When we say that man's surroundings are shot through with personality we are iterating Van Til's representational principle.

Third, the starting point for Van Til's entire theological enterprise is *special revelation*. He does not begin with a bare theistic notion of God founded on some kind of natural revelation or theology, but explicitly

20. We should note that Fesko's work is intentionally selective, nevertheless he explicitly considers the theological background for the decrees, yet makes no mention of the Trinity.

21. J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context & Theological Insights* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 101. We should note that Fesko does maintain both primary and secondary causes.

22. Van Til cites Bavinck as writing, "The trinity is the heart of Christianity" in *DF4*, 33.

23. Van Til, *DF4*, 34.

24. Tipton, *The Trune Personal God*, 1.

25. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, second ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 28–29. From now on *CA*.

26. Van Til, *CA*, 29. He will later conclude, "The Christian teaching of the ontological Trinity, therefore, gives it a clearly distinguishable metaphysic, epistemology, and ethic. In all these three Christian theism is wholly different from any other philosophy of life" (p. 30).

27. Van Til, *SCE*, 96.

28. Van Til, *DF4*, 242, 243.

with the self-contained triune God who has made himself known by special revelation that has now been inscripturated.<sup>29</sup> The finite mind is in desperate need of special revelation, for on its own it cannot conceive of anything higher than a finite God, and for a finite God to foreordain whatsoever comes to pass is inescapably fatalistic. The significance of this can be seen by way of contrast with the popular formulation of R. C. Sproul.

### 1.3 CRITIQUE OF R. C. SPROUL

Sproul recounts an instance when he began a class by reading the opening lines from confession of faith chapter three. After reading it, he asked the class, “Is there anyone in this room who does not believe the words that I just read?” A multitude of hands went up. He then asks, “Are there any convinced atheists in the room?” Nobody raised their hands. He then quipped, “Everyone who raised his hand to the first question should also have raised his hand to the second question.”<sup>30</sup> He goes on to provide his reasoning for this, “I tried to explain to the class that the idea that God foreordains whatever comes to pass is not an idea unique to Calvinism. It isn’t even unique to Christianity. *It is simply a tenet of theism*—a necessary tenet of theism.”<sup>31</sup> According to Sproul, the decree by which God foreordains whatever comes to pass is merely a necessary result of God’s sovereignty.

We do not have the space to provide a full-fledged critique of Sproul’s position, though in a sense this entire

paper functions as a critique in that it argues that the only way to maintain the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility without devolving into fatalism or some kind of philosophical determinism is by way of the representational principle, which is inherently trinitarian and cannot be established by a bare non-trinitarian, theistic notion of God.

The issue is that the sovereignty of a general theistic god, as Sproul argues for, is *qualitatively* different from the sovereignty of the triune God of Scripture—there is no shared concept of sovereignty between the two. The former temporizes the eternal as it confines it within the bounds of finite understanding, while the latter alone interprets God’s sovereignty by means of purely eternal categories on the basis of special revelation.<sup>32</sup> The former fails to maintain the basic Creator/creature distinction, for the sovereignty and freedom of God does not go beyond finite instances of sovereignty and freedom—they are qualitatively the same. The latter, however, maintains the Creator/creature distinction in full force—the sovereignty of God is to be interpreted in eternal categories and so is qualitatively distinct from finite instances—they are qualitatively different, according to the Creator/creature distinction, but analogically related.<sup>33</sup> The former is fundamentally antitheistic (which is ironic as Sproul’s goal is to maintain that it is basic to theism), while the latter is consistently theistic. In summary, we might categorize Sproul’s conception of God’s sovereignty as “finite sovereignty” or “creaturely sovereignty,” while Van Til and the confession’s conception could be spoken of as “infinite sovereignty” or “absolute sovereignty,” which becomes the archetype of “finite sovereignty” or “creaturely sovereignty.” Van Til in an article for *Calvin Colledge Chimes* Editorial writes,

Our view of man as the spiritual production of God points to God as the archetype of all human freedom. Human freedom must be like God’s freedom, since man resembles God, and it must be different from God’s freedom since man is a finite creature. In God, then, lies the archetype of human freedom.... We are fashioned after God and our freedom after God’s freedom. But never ought we to lose sight of the fact that our freedom is distinguished from God’s freedom by reason of our finitude.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to Van Til’s archetype/ectype freedom schema, Sproul conceives of the freedom of God and the freedom of man as *qualitatively* equal since he ascribes freedom to God on the basis of natural reasoning. In other words,

29. Cf. Geerhardus Vos, *RD*, 1:177: “In the creation of the universe by the triune God lies the guarantee that nature also, as far as it extends, provides a trustworthy revelation of the being of God. It is not as if the natural revelation must lead to Unitarian results and then suddenly, in a totally unprepared fashion, the idea of the Trinity appears before us on the basis of God’s supernatural revelation. The more and better we get to know nature, the more we will be brought face to face with the *triune* God” (emphasis mine).

30. R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 171.

31. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 172.

32. While the conscious content of Sproul’s teaching is theistic, the hidden impetus is surprisingly pantheistic in that God is changed into man and his eternal attributes are defined by the temporal. For the helpful distinction between “conscious content” and “hidden impetus” see Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:76. Vos has in view Lutheran Christology, but his critique of its underlying pantheism on pages 79–81 is applicable to our critique of Sproul. The mixture of the eternal and the temporal will also be explored later when we consider Van Til’s critique of Luther’s semi-determinism and Melancthon’s synergism.

33. See Van Til, *SCE*, 109.

34. Van Til, “Freedom” in Collection of Articles from 1920–1939, 4. <https://presupp101.wordpress.com/2011/08/13/collection-of-articles-from-1920-1939-by-cornelius-van-til/> [accessed July 26, 2018].

God and man subsist on the same spectrum of freedom with God positioned above man. The distinction is not qualitative, but *quantitative*. Many errors arise from this schema. First, God's absolute freedom and sovereignty does not *establish* man's freedom as the WCF teaches, but rather *limits* it in a kind of zero-sum game.<sup>35</sup> Sproul writes, "Autonomy implies absolute freedom. We are free, but there are *limits* to our freedom. The ultimate *limit* is the sovereignty of God."<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, "if God has no right of coercion, then he has no right of governing his creation."<sup>37</sup> Because God is above man on the spectrum of freedom, he can restrict or limit man's freedom, but man can never restrict God's freedom. So, Sproul concludes, "God is free. I am free. God is [quantitatively] *more* free than I am. If my freedom runs up against God's freedom, I lose. His freedom restricts mine; my freedom does not restrict his."<sup>38</sup>

This positions Sproul between a rock and a hard place, for his abstract notion of analogy inevitably results in God and man being correlative to one another.<sup>39</sup> First, if man's freedom cannot limit God's freedom then he has cascaded into *fatalism* or *determinism* and the relationship between God and man is purely *mechanical* and *impersonal*. He is unable to do full justice to

35. "This world has meaning *not in spite of*, but *because of*, the self-completeness of the ontological Trinity" (Van Til, *IST*, 359). Herman Bavinck also avoids the rationalism that would set God's freedom and man's freedom in opposition to one another, rather than understanding the former to establish the latter: "If God and his human creatures can only be conceived as *competitors*, and if the one can only retain his freedom and independence at the expense of the other, then God has to be increasingly restricted both in knowledge and in will. Pelagianism, accordingly, banishes God from his world. It leads both to Deism and atheism and thrones human arbitrariness and folly. Therefore, the solution of the problem must be sought in another direction. It must be sought in the fact that God—because he is God and the universe is his creation—by the infinitely majestic activity of his knowing and willing, *does not destroy* but instead *creates and maintains* the freedom and independence of his creatures" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:376–77, emphasis mine; see also p. 379). Likewise Geerhardus Vos understands God's eternal decree as the foundation of man's freedom: "...God can realize His decrees with reference to His creatures *without needing to limit their freedom in a deterministic manner*. Their free acts are not uncertain and the certainty to which these acts are connected is not brought about by God in a materialistic, pantheistic, or rationalistic manner. As the omnipresent and omnipotent One, the personal One, He can so govern man that man can do nothing without His will and permission and still do everything of himself in full freedom. When God sanctifies someone, He is at work in the depths of his being where the issues of life are, and then the sanctified will acts of itself and unconstrained outwardly no less freely than if it never had been under the working of God. *The work of God does not destroy the freedom of the creature but is precisely its foundation*" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:90–91, emphasis mine).

36. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 181, emphasis mine.

human personality as well as the personalistic covenantal context in which man operates and the decree of God is understood—in fact, Sproul makes no mention of the covenant in his book.<sup>40</sup> Behind this stands a compromised doctrine of the Trinity. For, as we will demonstrate later, it is impossible for God, who is absolute personality, to create except according to the representational principle.<sup>41</sup> The absolutely personal God, in whom there is no residue of impersonality, cannot create an impersonal environment and continue to be the absolutely personal God.<sup>42</sup>

Second, if man is granted any freedom, then to whatever extent he is free, to that extent God has conceded his own freedom, made himself dependent upon the creation, introduced into himself elements of impersonalism, and so, ultimately, has ceased to be God.

37. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 182.

38. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 182, emphasis mine.

39. "When one thus begins with the abstract notion of the analogy of being, God and man are bound to come out of this vague sort of being as correlatives to one another" (Van Til, *IST*, 333). Van Til says this with regard to Roman Catholic theology, but it applies to the natural reasoning of Sproul. Both "cannot find a real creation doctrine.... One must choose between saying that God is a self-contained being and that human beings are created analogous of him while he is the original and not the analogue of them, and saying that there is a vague general being that divides itself by the process of limitation into various modes. In the former case, we have the truly Christian notion of being, and in the second case, we have what is really the pagan notion of being. The Aristotelian notion of the analogy of being cannot be harmonized with the Creator-creature idea of Scripture" (p. 333). We must begin concretely with God's self-revelation in Scripture regarding his original sovereignty and original freedom and from there analogically develop our conception of man's derivative freedom and derivative sovereignty. While we have exposed the fundamental methodological problem with Sproul's view, we can say positively that, like Jonathan Edwards, whom Sproul is dependent upon in his formulation, he does, in fact, demonstrate the impossibility of affirming the liberty of indifference of the faculty of the will—a major tenet of the Arminianism and Liberalism that Edwards was combating. Van Til provides a critique of Edwards' position in his essay "The Will and its Theological Relations," 30–32, 36–38. He does not view Edwards as operating on purely anti-theistic grounds, but as trying to mix both theism and Berkeleian Idealism, the *principium speciale* and the *principium generale*.

40. The same can be said about Edwards who seems not to have escaped his Berkeleian Idealism. See Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 37. He writes, "Berkeleian idealism must always tend to abstraction from the finite in order to do justice to the infinite. Mysticism on this basis becomes a denial of the finite processes; a theory of the will on this basis can never do complete justice to man" (p. 37).

41. "Since the whole being of God, if we may in all reverence say so, is built upon the representational plan, it was impossible for God to create except upon the representational plan" (Van Til, *SCE*, 79).

42. Sproul only speaks of God as personal once in the final chapter of his book: "Predestination is rooted in the character of a personal and righteous God" (*Chosen by God*, 261).

Here we can recognize the significance of Van Til beginning with special revelation as his ultimate standard, rather than natural reason.<sup>43</sup> There is, according to Van Til, an absolute antithesis between the two *principia*.<sup>44</sup> Because of the noetic effects of sin, natural reason or general revelation cannot arrive at a biblical understanding of God's nature, attributes, and decrees and man's relation to them. Van Til writes,

43. Van Til distinguishes between a Christian way of negation and a non-Christian way of negation. The former begins with the personal and concrete God of Scripture as its ultimate starting point, while the latter begins with the creature and arrives at an empty and abstract notion of God. This point can have massive pastoral implications. Van Til writes, "That abstract way of negation is a convenient tool for the sinner by which to remove the positive attributes of God from making direct demands upon him" (IST, 324). In other words, the sinner cannot entirely escape their sense of God and so tries to hide away in *imagined places of impersonality*. While the believer loves being *coram Deo semper*, the sinner hates that he is everywhere confronted with the self-conscious revelation of the absolute personal God, so that his environment is shot through with *personality*. An *imagined* environment of impersonality is shot through with *chance*, so that man lives, moves and has his being in a void or vacuum. This upholds fallen man's false sense of autonomy, for it means his surroundings impose zero obligation upon him (contrary to living within the personal plan of God). Instead of remaining a finite covenant personality in his fallen estate as a covenant breaker, he *impersonalizes* (a) God, (b) his environment and (c) himself. Yet despite his attempt to salvage his autonomous personhood in his revolt against the One in whom he has his being (by conceiving of him abstractly), he ironically makes *himself* an abstraction and so ceases to be a *person*. In contrast, our *union* with Christ by which we receive all the benefits of redemption is unto our *communion* with the self-contained trine God of Scripture, who is Absolute Personality—fellowship with him alone can satisfy the hearts of men. This means our preaching should confront people with this personal, covenantal God as their only comfort in life and in death, and in our evangelism we should expose the areas of impersonality where sinners are trying to hide, and point them to the grace of God that freely invites them through the shed blood of the God-man, Jesus Christ, into the marvelous light of his presence, which is charged with personality. Van Til will go on to critique Barth who operates according to an abstract notion by assuming "no difference between the Christian and the non-Christian when it comes to knowledge of the things of this world" (p. 325). The same could be argued against Sproul here as he conceives of a definition of God's freedom and sovereignty that does not begin with special revelation, but is arrived at by the natural reasoning of all people, whether Christian or non-Christian. "If man claims to know anything independently of God, he has equated the level of his own thought with the level of God's thought" (p. 325). Herein is our critique of Sproul's univocal reasoning of God's freedom and man's freedom, rather than conceiving of them in an analogical fashion according to the basic Creator/creature distinction. Sproul moves from a creaturely conception of freedom and by way of eminence arrives at God's freedom. But this introduces only a finite God, a God whose freedom is like man's freedom; rather than man's ectypal freedom being analogical to God's archetypal freedom. While we must speak of God anthropomorphically, for we are creatures and that is how God has revealed himself in Scripture, yet "we must be alert to the

Fundamentally anyone that has placed himself or who has been placed upon the basis of the *principium speciale* as before defined, will try to do justice to all the elements in revelation. He makes God's revelation the standard and adjusts his concept of liberty accordingly. On the other hand anyone standing on the basis of the *principium generale* will in the ultimate sense make himself the standard, will not without reservation submit himself to revelation and thus either come to determinism, whether it be pantheistic, materialistic or rationalistic, or to libertarianism according as his views of psychology, epistemology and metaphysics may vary.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the mixture of the two *principia* leads into the errors of rationalism and impersonalism. According to Van Til, when one is not *wholly* committed to special revelation and does not *wholly* submit to the position of Scripture on the nature of God and of man, then,

surreptitiously a new head arises from the serpent of rationalism, and there results confusion worse confounded. If this is not the case it is a happy inconsistency. The views of God and man and of their relations to one another, i.e. the views of the will, vary as they consistently or inconsistently keep out this rationalistic motif.<sup>46</sup>

danger that we should forget that God is the original and that we are the derivatives" (p. 326). "Everything with respect to God is on the plane of the *absolute*, while everything with respect to man is *derivative*. On the other hand, we have in man a copy, something of that which God has revealed with respect to himself. Man's being is analogical of God's being" (p. 327). Thus we speak of God's absolute covenant personality as the archetype of man's finite covenant personality. We begin with God's concrete special revelation and reason about God analogically (not univocally or equivocally). Our conception of God, then, is "an analogical reproduction of the notion that God has of himself. Our notions or concepts are finite replicas of God's notions" (p. 328). An abstract approach to God's freedom and sovereignty ends in impersonalism.

44. Van Til writes, "The *principium speciale* is a denial of the ultimate validity of the *principium generale*. By the former we are placed on Biblical grounds. This implies the recognition that we accept a logic that is higher than ours as the final bar of appeal. Hence we seek not to subject any part of Scripture to the *principium generale*, nor subject any part of Scripture revelation to any other part, for that amounts to the same thing as again subjecting it to our own judgment" ("The Will in its Theological Relations," 77).

45. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 28. He concludes regarding Edwards, "For the time being it suffices that we have pointed out Edwards' failure to harmonize entirely all the givens of revelation. And again this was due to the fact that he tried to combine to an extent the *principium generale* with the *speciale*, or at least that he did not fully see their complete antithesis. From time to time the old leaven of Berkeleyan Idealism asserted itself; then Edwards lost to an extent the purely Biblical theistic conception of God and man" (p. 38).

46. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 28.

By conceiving of the sovereignty of God by means of natural reasoning,<sup>47</sup> Sproul posits God's freedom and man's freedom as univocal concepts and is unable to arrive at a qualitatively different, though analogically related freedom between God and man and so fails to maintain the basic doctrine of creation that establishes the Creator-creature distinction and forbids "the intermixture of the categories of time and eternity."<sup>48</sup> Sproul's intention is for man to realize his end of living to the glory of God and he attempts to secure this in his formulation by not compromising the sovereignty of God, while also doing justice to man's freedom. However, owing to his flawed methodology, he tries to arrive at man's chief end by way of *subtraction* from finite covenant personality, rather than through the *realization* or *establishment* of it.

## 2. Covenant Theology: Absolute Personality and Finite Covenant Personality

We have already recognized the covenant as the architectonic principle of the WCF and noted the deficiency of Sproul's view to maintain a robust covenant theology in which the finite personality of man is fully realized and established. It has been the prerogative of a consistent Reformed theology committed to an unmixed *principia speciale* to establish the relationship between the triune God and man, "maintaining even then the absolute dependence of man upon God, or in other words maintaining the Absoluteness of God and yet allowing of a finite covenant personality with ample room, and exactly enough room for the highest and only possible form of freedom conceivable for a creature."<sup>49</sup> This has been accomplished by way of a full-fledged covenant theology.

This has arose from a desire to be faithful to three great principles found in Scripture, namely,

first that all work of man must find its basis in a preceding work of God. Secondly, that in all his works man ought to reveal the image of God and be a means to revelation of the virtues to God and thirdly, that this purpose must be attained not passively, but actively through the mind and will, through the conscious life of the finite creature.<sup>50</sup>

The covenant idea avoids the rationalistic schema entirely, falling neither into the error of fatalism (as Sproul trends toward) nor the error of Pelagianism or Arminianism in which the will of man is thought to operate independent of the plan of God. Reformed theology is opposed to both of these positions for a non-covenantal

relation "at one point or another is bound to wreak itself in a pantheistic ulcer, or a deistic frost."<sup>51</sup> The covenant alone furnishes the possibility of real human freedom. "The current of divine influx into temporal life descends through the copper line of the covenant and is mediated through the covenant personality of Adam and dispatched without obstruction to his posterity."<sup>52</sup>

By covenant theology, according to Van Til and the Reformed tradition, "is not meant that theory about the relation of Adam to his posterity that is opposed to Realism, but rather it is that *larger view that looks upon the entire relation between God and man in creation and redemption to be of a federal nature.*"<sup>53</sup> So, as we cited earlier, "The covenant idea is nothing but the expression of the representational principle consistently *applied to all reality.*"<sup>54</sup> Covenant theology has provided the Reformed with a "firm and conscious metaphysical basis."<sup>55</sup>

Van Til makes explicit that undergirding the covenant idea as its theological or doctrinal basis, which helps to avoid the errors of rationalism when formulating the relationship between God and man, the Infinite and the finite, is the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the personal covenant relation has its foundation in the exhaustively personal relations of the Trinity. Both of these elements—the covenant and God as none other than the self-sufficient triune God of Scripture—are not foreign to the Westminster Confession, but integral to it, and will be skillfully weaved together by Van Til for a thoroughly Reformed (and so biblical) conception of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This, in turn, incites us to a consideration of his *representational principle*, which we come to next.

47. In his article, "The Will in its Theological Relations," Van Til evaluates the entirety of secular philosophy from the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle to Enlightenment thinkers, Kant and Hegel, and concludes "that we shall have to choose definitely between the alternative of building on natural reason and, if we be logical, turn to despair, or admit that we must get down from our pedestals as judges and let God pronounce judgment upon us" (p. 23).

48. Van Til, *SCE*, 66.

49. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 46. That it is the *only* form has an apologetic import, for "the implication of the finite consciousness is theism" (p. 77).

50. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 46. These same three principles were mentioned in an earlier article by Vos (see fn. 2).

51. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 54.

52. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 54.

53. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 54. This is not the same as confusing covenant and ontology as Ralph Smith does in *Paradox and Truth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002).

54. Van Til, *SCE*, 96.

55. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 47.

56. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 47.

### 3. Van Til's Representational Principle

#### 3.1 THE REPRESENTATIONAL PRINCIPLE

We have demonstrated that Van Til does not ascribe the eternal decree to the non-revelatory god of theism. To ascribe the eternal decree to such a god is to ascribe it to a figment of rationalism and inevitably fall into a kind of fatalism or determinism. Such a god does not exist. The Subject of Westminster Confession 3.1 is the triune God of Scripture who has been described in 2.1–3. Therefore, “God,” that is, *the self-sufficient triune God of Scripture* and none other, “from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (WCF 3.1).<sup>57</sup>

Van Til's representational principle can be understood in two ways. Tipton provides a concise overview,

First, when understood *in se*, the representational principle denotes the absolutely personal fellowship within the ontological Trinity. The personal communion within the Godhead is so complete that it excludes every vestige of impersonality. In addition to this, the representational principle, understood *pro nobis*, denotes the *covenantal relationship* among the persons in the Godhead, or between the Creator and the creature. In Van Til's thought, the absolutely personal and self-sufficient triune God provides the ontological ground for the *possibility* of the covenant relationship.<sup>58</sup>

57. It goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it is interesting to note that Herman Bavinck understood that deterministic views of reality reflect a deeper misunderstanding of the doctrine of God, particularly his trinitarian nature. See his *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:360–61; James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 102–3. “The concept of God as simultaneously sovereign and non-coercive is rooted, for Bavinck, in the Trinity” (p. 103).

58. Tipton, *The Triune Personal God*, 114–15.

59. Tipton, 89.

60. Van Til defines perichoresis as follows: “As to the relation of the persons of the Godhead one to another, the church fathers further spoke of a περιχορησις or ενυπαρξις or in Latin, *circumcessio* or *Inexistentia*, i.e. the persons of the godhead exist mutually in one another (Jn 17:21). There is a sort of inward circulation of the Godhead, an eternal movement within the being of God. The persons are distinct from the Divine Essence not *modaliter*—Sabellianism, nor *essentialiter*—Tritheism, nor *formaliter* or *ratione*, but *realiter*, which can have meaning for us only by negation of the others because admittedly we here peer into mystery” (“The Will in its Theological Relations,” 47).

61. Tipton, *The Triune Personal God*, 100.

62. Van Til, *SCE*, 78.

63. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 48.

#### 3.2 THE REPRESENTATIONAL PRINCIPLE IN SE

When we come to understand the representational principle *in se*, we must begin by noting that Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity avoids any kind of rationalism that would prioritize either the unity above the diversity (modalism) or the diversity above the unity (tritheism). Instead, he maintains both as equally ultimate and conceives of them as being eternally harmonized in the absolute personality of the ontological Trinity. Tipton writes, “Van Til's approach will not grant logical primacy either to God's simple and undivided *ousia* nor the divine *hypostases*; rather, he sees both as limiting conceptions which are neither logically nor metaphysically prior to one another, since unity and diversity in the Godhead are equally ultimate.”<sup>59</sup> Tipton will go on to observe that Van Til includes the doctrine of *perichoresis* along with God's *ousia* and *hypostases* as equally ultimate limiting conceptions.<sup>60</sup> This forms the basis for Van Til arguing that “every aspect of God's triune life is *exhaustively* personal.”<sup>61</sup> Here then is the representational principle *in se*: “In the Trinity there is completely personal relationship without residue.”<sup>62</sup> In this respect, God is absolute or ultimate personality.

Before proceeding we should also note here that Van Til conceives of God's eternal decree concerning the creation as being of the nature of an eternal covenant, which might lead us to speak of Absolute Covenant Personality belonging to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He writes,

All the decrees, having reference to creation or recreation, i.e. to all finite existence, are accordingly of the nature of an agreement between the persons of the Divine Essence; i.e. the relation between the Divine persons is a *covenant relation*. In this *eternal covenant*, the covenant of the decrees, God deals with man. In one sense these decrees are opera ad intra, because they still effect nothing historical, yet in another sense they are opera ad extra, because they have reference to that which will historically occur. But in each case they are a covenant activity within the Godhead by which the relations of man to God are established. All the relation of God to temporal existence is accordingly a covenant relation. It is the One God that creates, yet *it is through covenant relation that He creates*; it is the One God that redeems but *it is through covenant relation that he redeems*.<sup>63</sup>

Both creation and redemption are wholly encompassed by the covenant relation—nothing exists outside of its bounds (cf. Col. 1:15–20). Here we are confronted

head-on with Van Til's representational principle, which the covenant idea gives expression to. At no point, whether in creation or redemption, does man exist in an impersonal, non-covenantal relation laden with chance; rather, his environment is shot through with personality at all times and in every way. It is through the exhaustively personal covenant relation that the absolutely personal triune God creates. And it is through the exhaustively personal covenant relation that the absolutely personal triune God redeems.

Here we begin to see how the absolute covenant personality of God stands in relation to finite covenant personality in an archetypal or analogical fashion. This should come as no surprise for man is created in the image of God, which gives expression to the complete relation of man to God. "Man cannot be thought of, or expressed in terms of a phenomenon of nature; he is related to God and finds his explanation in him."<sup>64</sup> In man as the image of God, then, is a complete finite personality, which possesses a freedom analogical of God's freedom, only derived and dependent.<sup>65</sup> To conceive of man as autonomous, that is, independent of the consciousness or plan of God, is to sever him from the source of his existence and ascribe to him a kind of freedom that does not suit his own being. Van Til writes,

Now the highest freedom has always been ascribed to God, and yet He also possessed the highest necessity, for He can do nothing contrary to his nature. So of the activity within the Godhead we must say that it was at once necessary and free. In God there is perfect freedom because in him there is the perfect interaction of divine personalities. Hence we seek a similar freedom of finite personality in man. There is no external constraint upon man nor anything inherent in the nature of man whether of body or soul that prevents spontaneous expression of personality.<sup>66</sup>

The first implication of this exhaustively personal covenant idea, according to Van Til, is that "since it is the divine essence that makes the covenant within itself with reference to creation, all temporal events are *forever certain*."<sup>67</sup> This includes the certainty of sin, for nothing exists (nor can exist) in an impersonal atmosphere independent of the plan of God. Second, and consistent with the first, "the reality and vitality of the personal and therefore covenant relation within the Trinity, however unharmonizable it is for our logic, with the Oneness of the divine essence also forms *the basis for a real freedom of the finite person*."<sup>68</sup> God does not enter into covenant relations with man and so treat

him as a stone or a block; that is, he does not treat him contrary to the nature he created him with.<sup>69</sup> While all temporal events are certain, so that for God nothing is contingent, there is still a real finite freedom belonging to his image bearers. The covenant relation does not *subtract* from man's personality, but rather *establishes* it, providing man with "a genuine free finite covenant personality."<sup>70</sup> Man was always to recognize his freedom in the realization of the purposes of God, that is, within the plan of God.<sup>71</sup> He concludes,

The covenant relation is therefore the *only* relation in which the finite stands to the infinite, because the eternal persons of the divine Trinity stand to one another in covenant relation.... Now this covenant relation between God and the finite world enables us, therefore, to maintain in the last analysis, the absolute dependence of creation upon God, so that no substance, or power or "phenomenal [*sic*] chance, act or quality has its certainty outside of the plan of God, and yet also it

64. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 52.

65. The notion of man's freedom as derived and dependent, that is, *creaturely*, is taken from Scripture. The Reformed have maintained man's freedom *in this biblical sense* and not in the sense of autonomy and independence from God. Van Til writes, "The followers of Dort should seek to bring these Arminian defenders of 'free will' to realize that their basic commitment to Christ should lead them to take their notion of freedom from Scripture rather than from a presupposed ultimate of experience" (*The Sovereignty of Grace: An Appraisal of G. C. Berkouwer's View of Dort* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1969], 24).

66. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 52.

67. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 48.

68. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 48.

69. See Anthony Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant*, 68–69, 111–12, 166–67, 238–39, 330. "The covenant of grace does not put man to death, and does not treat him as a stick or a block, but it takes man into itself as a totality, with all his powers and faculties, with soul and body, for time and eternity. It envelops him completely, does not annihilate his power but takes away his impotence, does not destroy his will but sets him free from sin, does not stupefy his consciousness but delivers him from darkness. It recreates the entire man and causes him, renewed by grace, with soul, spirit, and body, freely and voluntarily to love God and to dedicate himself to him. The covenant of grace therefore proclaims that God honors and glorifies himself not at the expense of but for the advantage of man. God's glory celebrates its triumphs particularly in the re-creation of the entire man, in his illumined understanding and in his restored freedom" (167).

70. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 48.

71. So Van Til, "[I]n the rational creature there is a self-conscious finite reflex to the covenant relation within the Trinity and in relation to the Trinity, so that the relation of all creation to God is now centered in that finite consciousness and man is to rule over the universe, making it subservient to the revelation of God's covenant beauty" ("The Will in its Theological Relations," 53).

gives to creation that reality outside of God that must be maintained over against Pantheism. The world is no emanation of God, nor is it in deistic fashion independent of Him.<sup>72</sup>

### 3.3 THE REPRESENTATIONAL PRINCIPLE PRO NOBIS

We next consider the representation principle *pro nobis*. Could the absolutely personal God create an impersonal atmosphere? Can those created in the image of the ultimate personality operate in an environment of chance? Van Til writes,

In the Trinity there is completely personal relationship without residue. *And for that reason* it may be said that man's actions are all personal too. Man's surroundings are shot through with personality *because* all things are related to the infinitely personal God. But when we have said that the surroundings of man are really completely personalized, we have also established the fact of the representational principle.<sup>73</sup>

Man and the entire creation at all times and in all places are dependent upon the infinitely personal God—not a single atom lives, moves or has its being outside of God.

72. ("The Will in its Theological Relations," 53.

73. Van Til, SCE, 78, emphasis mine.

74. Tipton, *The Triune Personal God*, 119, 120.

75. "How can we account for the idea of significant choices? ... Only if we have a God who through Christ controls whatsoever comes to pass do we have an alternative to placing man in a vacuum" (Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, [Philadelphia, Pa.: P&R Publishing, 1963], 110).

76. Van Til, SCE, 97.

77. Van Til, SCE, 97.

78. We will explore the influence of Calvin's doctrine of the Son and Spirit being *autotheos* and the world as the theater of God's glory on Van Til's representational principle later under his critique of Lutheranism. There is also the influence of the Hodges and the Old Princeton tradition, which is duly observed by Tipton, especially when it comes to the doctrine of perichoresis. Tipton notes, "He follows Hodge's theology of perichoresis and amplifies it" (SCE, 100). See also Tipton, "The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility," *WTJ* 64 (2002). I would also include Old Amsterdam as a major influence, especially the theology of Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper. The organic motif at the center of Bavinck's theology as explained recently by James Eglinton bears remarkable resemblance to Van Til's representational principle. Eglinton summarizes Bavinck's organic motif as: "a theology of Trinity *ad intra* requires a cosmology of organicism *ad extra*" (Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68). In the same way Van Til wants to maintain that on the basis of the absolute personality of the Triune God man's surroundings are shot through with personality, so Bavinck utilizes his organic motif to combat any mechanical view of man and the creation (see e.g., Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 71–72).

Van Til finds the basis for man's personal identity and actions in the antecedent and eternal personality and actions of the triune God.... The construct that accounts for the connection between the absolute triune personality of God and the 'completely personalized' character of the man's relation to God arise in terms of the representational principle. Viewed from an architectonic perspective, the representational principle simultaneously asserts the absolutely personal unity of the Godhead and accounts for the covenantal context of the created order [i.e., the completely personal God/man relationship].<sup>74</sup>

It is this covenantal context conceived of on representational lines and grounded in the triune God as absolute personality that avoids any mechanical relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The personality or consciousness of man is ontologically grounded in the absolute personality of God. The absolute personality of God is expressed in the covenant idea by which we understand that he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. This comprehensive foreordination provides the personalistic atmosphere in which the personality of man can operate; in fact, this is the *only* atmosphere in which the will of man can make significant and meaningful choices. In other words, the personality of man is not taken away or lost, but established *within* the exhaustive plan of God. If something is positioned outside the plan of God or outside of a personal covenantal context it is conceived in a void or a vacuum, that is, within an impersonal atmosphere of chance. This, in turn, would render man inoperative and his choices meaningless.<sup>75</sup>

"If the Persons of the Trinity are representationally exhaustive of one another, human thought is cast on representational lines too. There would in that case be no other than a completely personalistic atmosphere in which human personality could function."<sup>76</sup> The covenant gives expression to the personally charged atmosphere in which man lives *coram Deo semper*. Man is always surrounded by the personality of God. To put it negatively, man never operates in an impersonal environment surrounded by chance. Instead, he operates in a personal environment surrounded by the plan of God. "A finite personality could function in none other than a completely personalistic atmosphere, and such an atmosphere can be supplied to him only if his existence depends entirely upon the exhaustive personality of God."<sup>77</sup>

It is in this manner that Van Til understands Calvin to conceive of the personality of man.<sup>78</sup> "Man is not a

metaphysical independent being. Creation is taken seriously. *Man does not need for his responsibility a freedom that would enable him to do something beyond the plan of God.*<sup>79</sup> A freedom that operates outside of the plan of God inevitably operates in an impersonalistic environment surrounded by chance—in such an environment it would be impossible for man to operate and would render all of his actions meaningless and of no value.<sup>80</sup> Calvinism is the only alternative to complete impersonalism in which man cannot operate. “Covenant theology furnishes the only completely personalistic interpretation of reality.”<sup>81</sup> This will be explored in more detail below when we consider Van Til’s critique of Arminianism.

The reality and vitality of the personal and therefore covenant relation within the Trinity, however unharmonizable it is for our logic, with the Oneness of the divine essence also forms the basis for a real freedom of the finite person. God can thus also enter into historical covenant relation with man, and have this relation be real and vital, giving to man a genuine free finite covenant personality. The covenant relation is therefore the only relation in which the finite stands to the infinite, because the eternal persons of the divine Trinity stand to one another in covenant relation.<sup>82</sup>

The personal always assumes a covenant relation—the covenant relation is personal and wherever there is personality it is within the atmosphere of the covenant. This is the case in an ultimate, archetypal sense within the Trinity and ectypally represented in the creation. This, according to Van Til, forms the basis for a real freedom of the finite person.

That everything happens, including human choices, within the plan of God is objected to as deterministic or fatalistic in order to salvage human freedom and responsibility. However, the “only alternative is to make human choice operate in a vacuum, in chance. One either makes God and his plan the source and bound of possibility for man or makes chance, that is, pure possibility, the source and bound both of God and of man.”<sup>83</sup> Just as brute facts and acts do not exist, so there is no brute possibility.

#### 3.4 IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD TO CREATE EXCEPT UPON THE REPRESENTATIONAL PLAN

Van Til writes, “Since the whole being of God, if we may in all reverence say so, is built upon the representational plan, it was impossible for God to create except upon the representational plan.”<sup>84</sup> Why is this

the case? Tipton notes that Van Til has in mind a theological parallel to the absolute consequent necessity of the atonement. “Given the nature of God in his absolute justice and given his free decree to save the elect, it was not possible that God redeem except by the atoning sacrifice of the God-man. Similarly, given the exhaustive personal character of the Godhead, and given the free decree to create, it was not possible that God create apart from representational or covenantal categories.”<sup>85</sup> In short, for the *absolutely personal* triune God to create anything *impersonal* would be to deny himself and to contradict his own absolutely personal nature. We might also add that “given the fact that there is no vestige of impersonality within the Godhead, and given the premise that covenant relationship is relationship with no vestige of impersonality, Van Til reasons that there is no ontological and trinitarian ground for an impersonal relationship between the Creator and the creature.”<sup>86</sup> The exhaustively personal relationship within the triune God is expressed in the exhaustively personal relationship between God and man. “Thus, given the triune nature of God as revealed in Scripture as understood in Reformed theology, Van Til affirms the decretal impossibility of a non-covenantal order of creation and redemption.”<sup>87</sup>

#### 4. Providence: Ultimate and Second Causes

##### 4.1 VAN TIL AND THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH ON PROVIDENCE

In chapter 5 (“Of Providence”) of the confession, the divines defend against the charge of fatalism or determinism by teaching that second causes are not destroyed, but established by an ultimate cause.

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and

79. Van Til, *SCE*, 97, 98.

80. Van Til, *DF4*, 265.

81. Van Til, *DF4*, 265.

82. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 48.

83. Van Til, *DF4*, 208; cf. *IST*, 337.

84. Van Til, *SCE*, 79.

85. Tipton, *The Triune Personal God*, 123. Van Til recognizes this principle in Calvin’s theology. He writes, “Fact is, that for Calvin, God’s will is never arbitrary because it is expressive of God’s nature, while God’s nature is never to be identified with impersonal law because God’s nature is never taken in separation from God’s will. It is thus that *complete personalism and therefore complete stability are combined*” (*SCE*, 100).

86. Van Til, *SCE*, 100.

87. Van Til, *SCE*, 123, 124.

holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy (5.1).

Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, *he ordereth them to fall out*, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently (5.2, emphasis added).

Van Til notes, “Unbelievers, and Christians of the Romanist and evangelical persuasion, are ready to charge that in making God’s counsel the ultimate ground of whatever comes to pass, Reformed Christians really make God the author of sin and do injustice to the will of man, as well as to the genuine significance of contingency.”<sup>88</sup> This same objection was raised by Pighius against Calvin, and Van Til understands the confession here to speak “the language of Calvin.”<sup>89</sup> The confession positions the will of man, second causes and their contingency “within the ultimately determinative plan of God.”<sup>90</sup> It is non-Christian and so antitheistic to think of man’s freedom or second causes as independent of God’s decree, his creation and his providence.

#### 4.2 ULTIMATE CAUSE ESTABLISHES SECOND CAUSES

It is on the basis of Van Til’s representational principle that we can affirm with the confession both an Ultimate (or Remote or First) cause and Second causes. The Ultimate cause does not render the Second cause insignificant or meaningless, but rather establishes it within

the exhaustively personal covenantal context in which God and man relate.<sup>91</sup> “First and second causes do not stand antagonistically opposed to but supplement one another. Second causes come to their right only when related to first causes; if we give them more independence they themselves become first causes.”<sup>92</sup>

Van Til defends Calvin’s view that “second causes have genuine significance not in spite of, but just because of, the fact that they accord with the one ultimate cause or plan of God.”<sup>93</sup> It is objected that unless a cause be ultimate, it cannot have any significance.<sup>94</sup> But, according to Van Til, “Calvin argues that man’s choice is free and responsible just because it is within and therefore subject to the ultimate will of God.”<sup>95</sup> Any objection to this on the basis of it being fatalistic or deterministic requires that a genuine possibility may and must be outside the plan of God, which, as will be explored below under Van Til’s critique of Arminianism, is antitheistic. A consistently theistic view must maintain “that the second causes are subordinate to God as *prima causa*, but that in this very subordination they remain true *causæ*.”<sup>96</sup>

#### 4.3 GOD IS NOT THE AUTHOR OF SIN

Van Til notes that while he uses the word “ultimate” instead of “remote,” as Calvin uses, there is no essential difference between their usage.<sup>97</sup> It is objected that to maintain the truth that God has foreordained *whatever* comes to pass in effect makes God the author of sin. Calvin, however, directly denies this, asserting that the entrance of sin into the world “so proceeded from [man’s] own fault that God cannot, in any way, be considered the author of it.”<sup>98</sup>

In order to safeguard against ascribing to God authorship of sin, Calvin distinguishes between remote causes and proximate causes. While the fall of man was within the plan of God, man, not God, is the proximate cause of sin. As the proximate cause man was culpable and responsible for his action. In fact, “there could be no responsible proximate cause unless there were also an all-comprehensive remote cause.”<sup>99</sup> Later Van Til writes that only on the basis of Calvin’s distinction between remote and proximate causes “is it really possible to establish the exclusive responsibility of man for sin. For then, and then only, is the freedom of man really established and are secondary causes given a true foundation.”<sup>100</sup>

In his formulation, Calvin combats the objection that there can only be one cause (or that for an act to have significance it must be *unipersonal*, that is, it cannot take place according to the plan of God *and at the same time*

88. Van Til, *DF4*, 267.

89. Van Til, *DF4*, 267.

90. Van Til, *DF4*, 267.

91. “[I]n the last analysis second causes have no power to originate but that still they are real, and find their reality not in their subsumption under but in their covenant relation to primary causes” (Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 49).

92. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 48.

93. Van Til, *DF4*, 208.

94. “There are those that make the primary causes the only real origin of things and are in the danger zone of fatalism; but there are also those that emphasize the originality of second causes and they almost always succumb to the siren song of Deism” (Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 49).

95. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 49.

96. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 49.

97. Van Til, *DF4*, 243.

98. Cited in Van Til, *DF4*, 243.

99. Van Til, *DF4*, 243.

100. Van Til, *DF4*, 245–46.

be done by an act of man<sup>101</sup>). The will of man cannot be conceived of as the final or ultimate cause of its own acts without depersonalizing his context and so rendering his choices meaningless and insignificant. For “as ultimate, these second causes then rest on nothing better than chance. Thus all of human experience is meaningless.... It takes an *ultimate cause*, God, if there are to be genuine second causes.”<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, it would deny the grace of God freely given to sinners. “Making the distinction between proximate and remote causes enables Calvin to do full justice to the long-suffering of God without giving up the decree of God as basic to whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>103</sup>

“The providence of God, therefore, extends over all things great and small, at every turn, in every sphere. God is related to finite creation, but related in such a way that the finite is not abrogated through this relation, but realized through it.”<sup>104</sup>

## 5. Van Til's Critiques of Lutheranism and Arminianism

### 5.1 LUTHER'S SEMI-DETERMINISM

Van Til recognizes a systemic impersonalism in Lutheran theology that arose from its inability to “rid itself of the remnants of Scholasticism.”<sup>105</sup> Rather than severing the pagan system at its root, it only cut off the legalism that was its fruit. This scholastic influence is evident in the Lutheran conception of the image of God as consisting only in the moral attributes of knowledge, righteousness and holiness. They did not follow the Reformed in also affirming the image in the wider sense, that is, man's intellect and will. This is founded on a scholastic commitment to an “originally existing sense world,” which implies some independence from God.

Accordingly, not the whole of man's relationship as a self-conscious being was with the personality of God. In other words, man's relationship to the world about him was not completely mediated through the personality of God. There was a remnant of impersonalism about it all.<sup>106</sup>

In contrast to this Lutheran conception, Van Til and Calvin maintain that man's whole environment is shot through with personality and that he is always and everywhere confronted with the plan of God. Calvin rightly understood the world to be God's *theatrum gloriae*. Man is therefore always confronted by the revelation or self-consciousness of God about him and within his constitution—there are no brute, uninterpreted facts existing

apart from God.<sup>107</sup> That is to say, man can never strip himself of his covenant personality and enter into a void or some kind of impersonal atmosphere charged with chance. This is nothing less than the covenant idea that reaches all reality. In fact, Van Til understood Calvin as being “deeply convinced that true religion could thrive upon the basis of a covenant theology alone,” which simply expresses the representational principle founded in the absolutely personal triune God of Scripture.<sup>108</sup>

In contrast, the impersonalism of Lutheranism comes to the fore in Martin Luther's debate with Erasmus in his book *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther conceives of God as at some points dealing with his fallen image bearers “below the level of personal dealings.”<sup>109</sup> Man in his fallen estate was treated no different by God than as a stone or a block. Van Til draws this conclusion,

Luther not only argues for man's ethical inability as such, but virtually implies that man's relationship to God after the entrance of sin into his heart has made it necessary for God to deal with man mechanically. Luther's early teaching on predestination verges on the borderline of philosophical determinism.<sup>110</sup>

The remaining impersonalism of Scholasticism in Luther's theology naturally leads to this mechanical view of God's relationship to man. In contrast, the Westminster Confession teaches the following regarding man in his fallen estate:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto (WCF 9.3).

Here the confession, echoing Augustine, affirms that after the fall man was *posse peccare* and *non posse non*

101. Van Til, *SCE*, 100.

102. Van Til, *DF4*, 265.

103. Van Til, *DF4*, 247.

104. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 51.

105. Van Til, *SCE*, 67.

106. Van Til, *SCE*, 67.

107. Van Til, *SCE*, 95, 117. In order for this point to be maintained, all remnants of subordinationism needs to be banished from the Trinity. This is best achieved by Calvin's doctrine of the Son and Spirit being *autotheos*. See also p. 102.

108. Van Til, *SCE*, 98.

109. Van Til, *SCE*, 95.

110. Van Til, *SCE*, 95.

*peccare*. However, notice that man does not cease to have a will, so that he must be treated as a stone or a block. Rather, he “wholly lost all ability of will to any *spiritual good*.” Here is where the Lutheran conception of the image of God as consisting only in the moral attributes of knowledge, righteousness and holiness leads to impersonal dealings between God and man. Man is conceived of as independent of God and his plan; his freedom is understood as doing anything he pleases *without any reference to God*.<sup>111</sup> “Man’s knowledge is once more made to depend in some measure upon something other than the personality and self-consciousness of God.”<sup>112</sup> The Reformed concur that man lost the image of God in this narrow, moral sense, but continues in the image of God in the broader sense of having a will and understanding. The will itself was not lost, but only the *ability* of will to any *spiritual good*.

Over against Luther, Van Til maintains that “a completely Christian theistic epistemology can allow for no impersonalism anywhere along the line of the transactions between God and man.”<sup>113</sup> At no point does God treat his image bearers as mere stones or blocks.

#### 5.2 MELANCHTHON’S SYNERGISM

Van Til also notices that the “semi-determinism of Luther developed into the synergism of Melancthon.”<sup>114</sup> The intention of this development was to move away from God treating man as stones and to recognize man’s intellect and will in God’s dealings with him. This was to provide a greater emphasis on a personal relationship between God and man. However, Van Til notes,

When taken in its ultimate effect, synergism does not work in the direction of a greater personalization of

the relation between God and man. Synergism takes for granted that there can be no truly personal relation between God and man unless the absoluteness of God be denied in proportion that the freedom of man is maintained.<sup>115</sup>

We made this same point earlier in our critique of Sproul. If God’s freedom and man’s freedom are understood univocally, that is, of being the same species or of the same quality, then God’s sovereignty does not *establish* man’s freedom but only *limits* it. And to whatever extent man has freedom (or is abstracted from the plan of God) it is to that extent God has conceded his own freedom, become dependent upon the creation and welcomed into himself elements of impersonality. There is a depersonalization both of God and man wherever either concedes their freedom to the other. God and man become bound to temporal and impersonal categories. Van Til continues,

Synergism assumed that an act of man cannot be truly personal unless such an act be *unipersonal*. By that we mean that according to synergism, a personal act of man cannot at the same time, but in a difference sense, be a personal act of God. Synergism assumes that *either* man *or* God acts personally at a certain time, and at a certain place, but that they cannot act personally simultaneously at the same point of contact. In other words, synergism holds that personal activity on the part of man must always be at the expense of the personal character of that which surrounds him.<sup>116</sup>

Again, the requirement of a *unipersonal* act fails to take into account the Creator/creature distinction and reasons univocally about God’s freedom and man’s freedom. This reasoning is inconsistent with Van Til and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The confession maintains that God as the ultimate or primary cause does not *take away* the liberty or contingency of secondary causes, but rather *establishes* them. There is precedent given to God as the ultimate cause, for it is not the secondary causes that establish the ultimate cause. But neither is maintained at the expense of the other.

In addition, to demand that a personal act be *unipersonal* does not comport with the biblical principle of personal representation, that is, the representational principle (see Rom. 5:12).<sup>117</sup> Van Til explains,

One either maintains that human personal thought and action is representative, covenantal thought and action, because man is enveloped at every point by the claims of

111. Van Til, *SCE*, 75.

112. Van Til, *SCE*, 69.

113. Van Til, *SCE*, 68.

114. Van Til, *SCE*, 68. He will also speak of Luther’s view as “semi-mechanism” (p. 77).

115. Van Til, *SCE*, 68.

116. Van Til, *SCE*, 68.

117. “Van Til defines our representation in the context of covenant. Sinful philosophy, he tells us, refuses to believe that our thought and action is valid if God is involved. All of our thought and action must be completely independent if it is to be authentic. So, for example, Rom 5 and Adam’s representative headship must be left by the wayside if we want to affirm authentic and meaningful human behavior. Van Til calls this ‘unipersonal’ thought and action. It suggests that all of what we do must be done autonomously, in isolation from the triune God” (Hibbs, “Closing the Gaps,” 310). We might say, as there can be no brute facts, so there can be no brute acts. Vos draws a similar analogy between Adam’s representation of humanity in the covenant

God; or, one, in effect, maintains that human personal thought and action is autonomous. On this view, any personal act must be the act of the person acting alone. It must be unipersonal. An act can be truly personal only if the surroundings of the person be impersonal.<sup>118</sup>

This, however, is reduced to absurdity for it would require that there be only one person, lest the presence of another person render the surroundings personal. But if there is only one person there could be no personal relationship at all. We avoid this pitfall by affirming on the basis of special revelation that "because he is a creature, man must in his thinking, in his feeling, and his willing, be representative of God."<sup>119</sup> So, as Hibbs puts it, "we represent the triune God when we think the Father's thoughts after him as revealed in Scripture, when we echo the words of Christ and conform to his image as we speak the truth in love (Rom 8:29; Eph 4:15), and when we act by and through the power of the Spirit who indwells us (Rom 8:9–11). That, in essence, is how our analogical representation of the triune God works."<sup>120</sup>

Van Til recognizes in Synergism the Greek idea of the universe being independent of God. "If nowhere else," he writes, "the synergist at least extracts his own activity from the personal activity of God at some point in time. And just to that extent he has depersonalized God."<sup>121</sup> Man's freedom or originality is maintained at the expense of God. Lutheranism, at the bottom of it, mixes the eternal and the temporal by conceiving of man as independent of God, at least at some points where God has conceded his own freedom and sovereignty, and so "has not learned to interpret all reality in exclusively eternal categories."<sup>122</sup> Also, "Lutheranism has not been quite theistic enough in the sense of making God the completely original and exclusively original personality which serves as a foundation for the meaning of every bit of human predicate."<sup>123</sup> In contrast, Van and the Westminster Confession take into account the absolute distinction between the eternal and the temporal.

Thus, it is evident that Melancthon's project to provide a greater emphasis on the personal relationship between God and man did not accomplish its purpose. "There was an element of impersonalism in Luther's position, and that element of impersonalism merely changed its form, in the synergism of Melancthon."<sup>124</sup>

### 5.3 ARMINIANISM

Arminianism goes farther than Lutheranism in attributing to man's will an independence from the plan of God

and so conceives of it as operating in an even stronger impersonal environment.<sup>125</sup> Van Til notes that the most important element in the whole of Arminian theology is "that man's will and rationality include his ability to change the actual course of events as planned by God. Arminian theology attributes to man such powers as to enable him to do things that were not in the plan of God."<sup>126</sup> We might denote the most basic commitment of Arminian theology as autonomous human freedom, that is, the utter independence of human personality. A Pelagian notion of the will is thus assumed at the beginning of this theological project.<sup>127</sup>

In this schema of ascribing to man autonomous freedom, if man is to operate *within* the plan of God, then his choices are rendered devoid of any real significance and meaning. To put it positively, man must possess some creaturely metaphysical independence to go beyond the plan of God, if his choices are to be meaningful and his moral deeds real. For "an act to be considered ethical must occur in a vacuum. Or ... an act to be

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of works and the economy of the divine persons: "[This representation in Adam] has an archetypal example in the economy of the divine persons, in which the one person appears representatively for the others" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *Anthropology*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012–2014], 33; see also p. 42; Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," 245).

118. Van Til, *SCE*, 78.

119. Van Til, *SCE*, 78–79.

120. Hibbs, "Closing the Gap," 310.

121. Van Til, *SCE*, 68–69.

122. Van Til, *SCE*, 69. While it goes beyond the scope of this paper, this tendency is abundantly clear in the Lutheran doctrine of the two natures of Christ in which the eternal can be temporized and the temporal can be eternized. Van Til goes on, "The infinite enters into the finite and thus gives it reality. When the infinite has really come into the heart of the believer, he is happy and rejoices, but when the infinite withdraws, the salvation has also disappeared and joy is no more. Thus we find that instead of eradicating the leaven of paganism, Lutheranism once more returns with longing eyes to the fleshpots of Egypt. If there was need of anything, there was need of an emphasis upon the absolute distinction between the eternal and the temporal if the difficulties of Platonic reasoning were to be avoided. And exactly here we are disappointed in Lutheranism" (*SCE*, 70–71).

123. Van Til, *SCE*, 80.

124. Van Til, *SCE*, 80.

125. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 70.

126. Van Til, *SCE*, 83. In other words, it is presupposed that God is not the total source of possibility, but rather that possibility exists outside of God. See Van Til, *The Sovereignty of Grace: An Appraisal of G. C. Berkouwer's View of Dordt* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1969), 7, 13–14.

127. Van Til writes, "Back of Arminianism lies Pelagianism, for if man can decide about salvation after he has fallen in sin, he must have creaturely independence enough to start an absolutely new series" ("The Will in its Theological Relations," 71).

moral or immoral, must take place in a completely impersonal atmosphere.”<sup>128</sup>

But what is the theological impact of allowing for an action to occur outside of or beyond the plan of God? The primal sin in the Garden, for example, can be conceived of as either within or outside the plan God. If it was *within*, “then the Arminian idea of choice is clearly untenable, inasmuch as choice must then mean something that is consistent with the plan of God.”<sup>129</sup> If it was *outside*, “then by definition we have facts that are beyond the control of God, and we are on antitheistic grounds.”<sup>130</sup> But a universe over which God does not have complete control is an impersonal universe. And in an impersonal universe man is rendered inoperative and his choices meaningless. Arminianism, then, in an attempt to save meaningful choices has placed man in an environment in which meaningful choices are an impossibility.

Another example is that of faith and unbelief. Van Til writes,

If our faith is within the plan of God, it cannot be the result of the type of freedom that Arminianism desires because it cannot in that case be said that it would have been equally possible for us to disbelieve as to believe. In that case our choices and moral actions in general have genuine significance *because they are within the plan of God*. On the other hand, if our faith is not within the plan of God, things are by definition happening that are beyond the plan of God, and we are *ipso facto* on anti-theistic ground. Moreover, in the latter cause we would have the unique situation that faith, which is a thing much desired by God, should be occurring beyond his will and plan. Or again, we may say that our unbelief is either included in the plan of God or it is not. If it is not, we have facts happening beyond God’s once more.

128. Van Til, “The Will in its Theological Relations,” 87. “Arminian theology contends that man is in some measure influenced and surrounded by pure contingency. The Arminian calls this freedom. He claims to defend the idea of human responsibility over against Calvinist determinism. But in doing so he fails to see that, to the extent that one accepts contingency, to that extent human responsibility would have to function in a vacuum” (Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 110).

129. Van Til, *SCE*, 83.

130. Van Til, *SCE*, 83.

131. Van Til, *SCE*, 84–85.

132. Van Til, *SCE*, 88.

133. Van Til, *SCE*, 88.

134. Van Til, *SCE*, 85.

135. Van Til, *SCE*, 88.

136. Van Til, *SCE*, 88.

137. Van Til, *SCE*, 88.

138. Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 110.

If it is, then unbelief is genuine unbelief because of the fact that it is related to the plan of God.<sup>131</sup>

In liberating man from the plan of God, and attributing to him an originality and independence from the plan of God in a completely impersonal atmosphere, Arminianism has taken away the very personality of man and introduced elements of impersonality into God himself while robbing him of his glory in salvation.

Van Til’s critique exposes the foundation of Arminianism as being built upon the contradictory elements of both theism and antitheism. The Arminian commitment to man’s autonomous freedom, that is, the demand that meaningful choices be made in a vacuum or void, has led to a distortion of a truly biblical doctrine of God and anthropology, rendering them both fundamentally antitheistic. In addition, to require that a truly ethical act be entirely self-originated, that is, apart from God, also requires the denial of the basic doctrine of creation.<sup>132</sup> “Before Arminianism can make its doctrine tenable, it will have to make the whole of the non-theistic system, which holds to the existence of the universe apart from God, tenable too.”<sup>133</sup> It can lastly be noted that along with Lutheranism, Arminianism mixes the eternal and the temporal by reasoning univocally about God’s freedom and man’s freedom.

Over against this, Van Til reasons, “Every act of every human being must be related to the plan or it would have no significance at all.”<sup>134</sup> For an act to be considered ethical or moral, it must take place within a completely *personal* atmosphere, that is, within a comprehensive covenantal context that gives expression to the representational principle founded in the absolutely personal triune God in whom there is no residue of impersonality. Only in this sense is the freedom and contingency of secondary causes established. “It is utterly impossible to think rationally of an act operating ethically in a void” for such “holds bare possibility to precede actuality.”<sup>135</sup> Instead, Van Til maintains the biblical position, which “holds God to be the source of all possibility.”<sup>136</sup> Lastly, instead of denying the doctrine of creation, Van Til can maintain it in full force, for “God can create creatures whose deeds are in correspondence with the will of God.”<sup>137</sup> In capitulating to the autonomous man, Arminianism “must live by the grace of its enemy.”<sup>138</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The central focus of this paper has been to consider the nature of our personal relation to God. We have

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*The Man in Linen: A New and Old Interpretation of Ezekiel 9–10. Continued from Page 36.*

big gap between an angel and God. However, as the list of passages above shows, God often manifests his glory through his angels. God and angel often seem to merge in appearance, if not ontologically. Therefore, when it comes to an *appearance* of God in a *theophany*, the distance between God and angel is not so large, however big the ontological difference might be.

Some might conceivably object that such a preincarnate appearance of Christ would jeopardize the uniqueness of the incarnation of Christ. For this reason, I have chosen the appearance of Christ as the Angel of the Lord. This Angelic appearance of Christ would have looked human, was angelic, and was further Christophanic. There is no need to suppose that this appearance of Christ looked exactly like Jesus would look centuries later, or like other theophanies or Christophanies. My position would thus be able to safeguard the uniqueness of the incarnation of Jesus Christ without precluding the possibility of the second person of the Trinity appearing in the Old Testament.

#### THE LARGER PICTURE

The interpretation on offer here has several implications both for the larger picture of Ezekiel, and for Ezekiel studies. To start with the Ezekiel implications, one rather obvious conclusion is that judgment oracles and visions, which largely predominate in the first part of Ezekiel, are still tempered with mercy and lovingkindness. There is always a remnant that God will spare, a remnant that does not bow the knee to Baal. Mercy can and often does interrupt judgment. As has been noted, the Shekinah glory had been in the process of leaving the temple and Jerusalem. The appearance and commission of the man in linen puts a temporary stop on that process, while the remnant is marked. God is both merciful and just. My position argues that it is God, the second person of the Trinity, who himself does the marking. Surely, this would be a cause for hope!

Many people believe that the God of the Old Testament is merely a God of judgment and holiness. This is a significant distortion. God is slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, as the oft-quoted words of Exodus 23 make plain. Even when the patience of God has run out with regard to the guilty, that does not mean his patience has come to an end with regard to those less guilty, or with those who are innocent of particular sins.

If God marks those who are his by a sign, then this marking in Ezekiel is of a piece with both circumcision, in the Old Testament, and baptism, in the New Testament. The Lord marks those who are his, not for his own sake, as if he needed

a reminder, but for the sake of angels and humans. There are differences between, say, baptism, and the mark in Ezekiel 9. Baptism is a new covenant ordinance that marks the inclusion of a person within the visible church, whereas the mark of Ezekiel 9 merely marks those to be saved from destruction. However, the idea of some kind of “marking” system distinguishing one group who is to receive grace from another group that will not receive grace is similar in both Ezekiel 9 and in circumcision/baptism.

In Ezekiel studies, while the position I advocate has been held in the past, it is rare, largely because of a reluctance among the majority of Old Testament scholars to seeing Jesus in the Old Testament. There are many reasons for this, not least including the Enlightenment, which has fragmented all knowledge and has contributed to a divorce between Old Testament and New Testament. A second reason has surely been the Holocaust. No one desires to offend the Jews, given what they went through in World War II. However much the Jews have suffered, their suffering does not make their reading of the Old Testament correct, nor does it make the Old Testament *their* Bible. Of course, there are scholars who would reject my conclusions while not laboring under these influences. Still, these influences do make positions such as mine less likely in the eyes of many scholars. While I write based on Christian assumptions, I hope also that the truth of Jesus’ words in John 5 and Luke 24 concerning the meaning of the Old Testament will also receive strong elucidation here. The Old Testament really is all about Jesus Christ.

How does this paper contribute to Ezekiel studies? A sharper understanding of what is happening in Ezekiel 9–10 furthers understanding of the whole section 8–11, and what significance the presence of the Angel of the Lord might have in a context where the Shekinah glory is, in general, leaving the temple in Jerusalem. Understanding who the man in linen is will also prevent unnecessary bifurcations of the text into diachronically separated layers. I hope also that this paper will contribute to an understanding of the unity of Ezekiel as a whole. If it is true that sections of text once thought to be indicative of diachronic differences in the text can be shown not to support that position, then more synchronic approaches will become more attractive to scholars. This will only prove more conducive to a theological understanding of the text, and promote a complete reciprocity between systematic theology and exegesis. ■

*Shot through with Personality: Establishing Man’s Freedom within the Sovereign Plan of God. Continued from Page 200.*

considered specifically the relationship between divine

sovereignty and human freedom and waded into the mystery of the way creatures relate to the Creator, the finite to the infinite, the one to the many, man to God.<sup>139</sup>

We conclude that Van Til, in congruity with the Westminster Confession of Faith, avoids the rationalism of both Arminianism and Lutheranism by way of his representational principle, which maintains a robust covenant theology that provides an exhaustively personalistic atmosphere in which the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom can be properly understood. The self-sufficient triune God of Scripture, in whom unity and diversity are eternally harmonized and equally ultimate, is the foundation of the representational principle, which is expressed by the covenant idea that reaches all reality, charging man's entire atmosphere with personality as he is always operating within the plan of God. The fact that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, as the confession unapologetically affirms, is the *only* environment in which the will of man can operate, his choices can be meaningful and secondary causes are *established*. In fact, "if one allows that anywhere at all man deals with facts or laws that are not based upon the self-conscious, everlasting self-affirmation of God, one is to that extent bound to a static or fatalistic view of reality."<sup>140</sup> And so God's sovereignty does not *take away* (contra Arminianism and Luther's semi-determinism) or *limit* (contra Sproul and Melancthon's synergism) man's freedom, but rather *establishes* it. Van Til summarizes his own conclusion in which we can hear echoes of Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1,

We found ... that the Reformed covenant theology remained nearest to this Biblical position. Other theories of the will go off on either of two byways, namely, that of seeking an unwarranted independence for man, or otherwise of subjecting man to philosophical necessitarianism. Reformed theology attempts to steer clear of both these dangers; avoiding all forms of Pelagianizing and of Pantheizing thought. It thinks to have found in the covenant relation of God with creation the true presentation of the Biblical concept of the relation of God to man. Man is totally dependent upon God and exists with all creation for God. *Yet his freedom is not therewith abridged but realized.*<sup>141</sup> ■

139. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 2.

140. Van Til, *IST*, 278.

141. Van Til, "The Will in Its Theological Relations," 77.

#### *Psallo*. Continued from Page 231.

In the latter, we remember how the Lord threatened His ancient people with bondage to their enemies in another land if they turned from Him, and He also encouraged them with liberty in their obedience. Spiritually, those who fear the Lord are delivered from sin's bondage, such that they are not enslaved to their lusts which bring even the good things of this life under that cruel mastery. They walk according to the law of liberty (James 1:25; 2:12), making a holy use of all the Lord gives them.

The metaphor of the vine as it relates to the wife of this blessed man speaks of a fruitful vine that grows to the uttermost extremity of his house. Several things are in order here: First, note fruitfulness. The blessing intimated here is the blessing of children, made more explicit in what follows. The fruit of the vine in Israel was a source of much joy, and those years in which the vine flourished were highly prized. But more, note here that this one vine grows to the utmost (Heb. זָרְקָה) portion of the house, translated in the KJV as "sides." The word is used in the Scriptures to speak of the extremity, the uttermost parts of a place (2 Kings 19:23; Isaiah 37:24; Jeremiah 25:32; 31:8; 50:41). I take this to mean, by implication, that this blessed man has one wife—there is no room for two—because this vine grows to all the extremities of his house—this picture of domestic happiness is not marred, as it was so often the case in Old Testament Israel, by polygamy, or divorce—his house is full with this one fruitful vine, which makes his heart glad.

The metaphor of the olive trees as they relate to his children is also instructive and encouraging. They are called olive plants, even perhaps transplants. They are like an olive orchard—planted, ordered, cultivated, cared for, and themselves issuing a product that is desirable, and speaks of true riches. Note that they are gathered around this man's table—they are not estranged, but intimate. He brings them into his closest circle—he gathers them to his table, there to do all that this lovely circumstance suggests. They have a place to gather together, to enjoy the good things of this life, to hear the instruction of a father, to interact with one another, and to present themselves before God in thankfulness for His bountiful goodness to them. Truly, while perhaps considered "old-fashioned" by many, this picture of a godly family regularly gathered around the dinner table, intimate, interacting with one another, hearing instruction, and praying together giving thanks to the Lord, is a timeless reminder of His goodness. Indeed, this is a picture of true riches beyond what is commonly possessed. This man has a domestic situation steeped in loveliness and peace. His labor furnishes a table, his wife fills his affections without a rival and brings him an opulent joy, and his children, well-ordered and close in proximity and affection, cause