

On the Shoulders of Giants: Van Til's Appropriation of Warfield and Kuyper

By Jeffrey C. Waddington

INTRODUCTION

Cornelius Van Til's presuppositionalist apologetic has often been understood as a critical rejection of the classical apologetic of Old Princeton stalwart Benjamin B. Warfield in favor of the viewpoint of Dutch statesman/theologian Abraham Kuyper. However, as Greg Bahnsen has pointed out, an accurate reading of Van Til qualifies this common assumption.¹ Of course Van Til is critical of Warfield and appreciative of Kuyper, but Van Til's assessment of both Warfield and Kuyper is much more complex than a categorical rejection of Warfield and wholesale embrace of Kuyper would suggest. Van Til attempted to build on the strengths and eschew the weaknesses of both these two Reformed giants. Van Til provides a *critical appropriation* of both Warfield and Kuyper as he seeks to explicate his presuppositional approach to apologetics. A clear understanding of Van Til's relationship to, and appropriation of, the insights of both Warfield and Kuyper is essential to grasping Van Til's method. Bahnsen has said as much:

The second reason for examining Van Til's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses in both Kuyper's viewpoint and Warfield's viewpoint is that we thereby gain a beneficial insight into the unique character and genius of Van Til's own conception of apologetics. He combined the strongest features of both the Amsterdam and the Princeton schools of thought and left aside features of both systems that did not comport with the best Reformed principles. A person who can explain the ways in which Van Til agreed and disagreed with both Warfield and Kuyper, is a person who understands presuppositional apologetics.²

Bahnsen helps with a descriptive analysis of Van Til's appropriation of Warfield and Kuyper. My goal in this

article will be to offer a reading of the primary sources with the assistance of Greg Bahnsen.³ My method will be to first note Bahnsen's schematic of Van Til's critical

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1. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999) 596–97. For a critique of Bahnsen's read of Van Til, see the recent review of Bahnsen's *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Powder Springs & Nacogdoches: American Vision Press & Covenant Media Press, 2008) by W. Gary Crampton in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 6 (2010): 239–242. This writer disagrees with that review, and believes that Bahnsen has faithfully interpreted Van Til's method, even if he diverged from the Westminster professor's view of other issues such as eschatology. Nevertheless, both men affirmed the right use of logic as a handmaiden of theology.

2. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597. Italics are the author's.

3. In addition to Bahnsen's encyclopedic *Van Til's Apologetic*, I have examined the following sources, all but one of which Van Til cites in his critical appropriation of Kuyper and Warfield. For Abraham Kuyper's insights, see his *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrick De Vries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980). This is a partial translation of Kuyper's three volume *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (a portion of vol. 1 and all of vol. 2 with an introduction by B. B. Warfield). For Warfield's insights into apologetics, see his "Introduction to Francis R. Beattie's *Apologetics*" in *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1970) 2: 93–105. Although not cited by Van Til, Warfield includes almost verbatim remarks from his Beattie introduction about Kuyper in his "A Review of *De Zekerheid Des Geloofs*," also found in *Selected Shorter Writings*, 2: 106–123, which is an interesting evaluation of Herman Bavinck's *The Certainty of Faith*. Two further Warfield resources include his article, "Apologetics," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Studies in Theology*, ed. Ethelbert D. Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 9: 3–21 and "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Ethelbert D. Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 1: 169–226. For Van Til's assessment of Warfield and Kuyper, see his

appropriation of Warfield and Kuyper, then conduct a brief discussion of each point in Bahnsen's analysis after which I will conclude with my own assessment of Van Til's critical appropriation. In the end we will see that Van Til stood on the shoulders of giants, and because of that, was able to see farther and more clearly than the giants themselves.⁴

BAHNSEN'S SCHEMATIC

Bahnsen explains Van Til's approach in the following manner:

According to Van Til, we find these three things in both Warfield and Kuyper: (1) a brilliant conviction of central importance which is relevant to our theory of knowledge and apologetics, (2) another notion, which is inconsistent with the first conviction, and then (3) a view of apologetics that is mistakenly inferred from that first conviction.⁵

Warfield:

- (W1) There is an objective, intelligible, and clear revelation of God to all men in nature and history.
- (W2) The evidence of Christianity only warrants the probability of its truth.
- (W3) Natural man is able to give a correct interpretation of God's natural revelation through the use of "right reason."

Kuyper:

- (K1) There is an antithesis between belief and unbelief that leads to the formation of two sciences.
- (K2) The antithesis is mitigated by areas unaffected by the fall (weighing, measuring, logic) and a limited area of neutral common ground.

A Christian Theory of Knowledge (Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1969) 229–254 and *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd edition (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1967) 260–299.

4. Van Til has made comments to this effect, "Standing on the shoulders of Warfield and Kuyper we honor them best if we build on the main thrust of their thought rather than if we insist on carrying on what is inconsistent with their basic position. Then we are most faithful to Calvin and to St. Paul." *Defense of the Faith*, 299.

5. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597.

6. See Van Til, *Christian Theory*, 230.

7. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597.

8. Warfield, "Introduction," *Writings*, 2: 103. This quotation is not without its own problems. What, for instance, is "pure reason"? However, the objectivity of evidence is the issue here. Warfield is arguing against what he perceives to be a mystical strain in the thought of Kuyper where Kuyper, according to Warfield, has fallen into the trap of attributing the validity of Christianity to the subjective change that occurs within the Christian in regeneration without consideration for the objective evidence for the truth of Christianity.

- (K3) Given the antithesis, apologetics is virtually useless and so deserves only a minor place in the theological encyclopedia.

Van Til:

Accepts W1 and K1, but rejects W2, K2 and the conclusions W3 and K3.

We can now turn to a more detailed analysis of the various elements to see how Van Til critically appropriated the epistemological and apologetic insights of both Warfield and Kuyper.

WARFIELD

At the outset it should be mentioned that Van Til understood that both Warfield and Kuyper held to essentially the same solid, biblically based Reformed theology and that his critical appropriation of each was with the goal of formulating an apologetic more consistent with the solid theology each man embraced.⁶

As noted above in (W1), Warfield was so convinced of the objectivity, intelligibility, and clarity of revelation to all men in nature and history that it was not reasonable for anyone to reject the truth of Christianity.⁷ The evidence of the truth of Christianity is available for all to assess, regardless of spiritual condition. Arguing against the notion that the validity of the faith resides in the subjective change that occurs in regeneration, Warfield notes,

It is not true that the Christian view of the world is subjective merely, and is incapable of validation in the forum of pure reason. It is not true that the arguments adduced for the support of the foundation of the Christian religion lack objective validity. It is not even true that the minds of sinful men are inaccessible to the "evidences"....⁸

In other words, the evidence for the validity of the Christian faith was a matter of public record. It was not merely about personal predilection. Warfield readily grants that the presence of the evidence will not in and of itself convert an unbeliever to the faith, for that is the work of the Holy Spirit. But the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is not done in the absence of the revelation of God in nature and history.

It is certainly not in the power of all the demonstrations in the world to make a Christian. Paul may plant and Apollos water; it is God alone who gives the increase.

But it does not seem to follow that Paul would as well, therefore, not plant, and Apollos as well not water. Faith is the gift of God; but it does not in the least follow that the faith God gives is an irrational faith, that is, a faith without grounds in right reason. It is beyond all question only the prepared heart that can fitly respond to the "reasons"; but how can even a prepared heart respond, when there are no "reasons" to draw out its action?⁹

God's revelation to all men in nature and history is compelling and while it by itself does not convert the unbeliever, it does need to be present for conversion to have a context in which to occur.

Given the clarity of this revelation, Warfield saw the necessity of apologetics. Christianity was in the world, Warfield said, to reason its way to preeminence.¹⁰ There was no need to be timid or shy. Christianity was true and it was even "scientific" in the best sense of that word.¹¹ Apologetics for Warfield, however, was positioned at the head of the theological encyclopedia because its goal was to illuminate the grounds for the possibility of a Christian theology. Apologetics sought to show that there was a God, the possibility of revelation, the nature of man as able to communicate with God and receive revelation, and then it sought to display and assess the evidence of revelation in the Christian Scriptures.¹² Warfield practiced the classical apologetic method which usually involved a two-step method of first showing the possibility or reality of a God (often in philosophical terms) and then moved to the historical evidence found in the Christian Scriptures.¹³ However, he also makes statements to the effect that Christianity should be defended as a system, in its totality, and not detail by detail.¹⁴

While Warfield is on solid ground to affirm the objectivity, intelligibility, and clarity of God's revelation to all men, he makes a wrong turn, so to speak, when he holds that the evidence for Christianity only yields probable certainty (W₂). In his article, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," Warfield addresses the matter of biblical evidence for the trustworthiness of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

Of course, this evidence is not in the strict logical sense "demonstrative;" it is "probable" evidence. It therefore leaves open the metaphysical possibility of its being mistaken. But it may be contended that it is about as great in amount and weight as "probable" evidence can be made, and that the strength of conviction which it is adapted to produce may be and should be practically equal to that produced by demonstration itself.¹⁵

Inductive examination of the evidence in the nature of the case, for Warfield, can never yield absolute certainty even when the evidence is absolutely clear.¹⁶

With regard to (W₃), the natural man's ability to assess natural revelation and the evidences of the truth of Christianity in special revelation, Warfield drew the illegitimate conclusion that the unbeliever can use "right reason" to properly do this.¹⁷ While Warfield recognized the noetic effects of sin, he does not apparently understand that to undermine the role of reason in assessing evidence of various kinds. Entering into this phase of the discussion is the concern of both Warfield and Kuyper with the scientific nature of real knowledge, especially the scientific nature of Christian theology. Science here is not limited to the natural sciences, but rather includes all disciplines that organize knowledge, including what Kuyper referred to as the "spiritual sciences" such as psychology and theology. Ideally, there is only one science to which members of the human race who are engaged in the scientific enterprise contribute. This includes both believers and unbelievers. Additionally, Warfield's approach to natural revelation at times seems to gloss over the difference between natural or general revelation which reveals God to man in nature and fallen man's formulation of a natural theology which is a response to that revelation.¹⁸

KUYPER

Kuyper's central epistemological insight (K₁) involved the recognition of the antithesis between belief and unbelief. While ideally there is but one science that human

9. Warfield, "Introduction," *Writings*, 2: 98. See also "Apologetics," *Works*, 9: 15.

10. Warfield, "Introduction," *Writings*, 2: 99–100.

11. Science as, at a minimum, the organization of knowledge. See Warfield's discussion of theology as a science in "Theology as a Science," in *Writings*, 2: 207–212. Kuyper also discusses the nature of science in his *Principles*, 59–63.

12. Warfield, "Apologetics," *Works*, 9: 4–5, 11.

13. Warfield, "Apologetics," *Works*, 9: 3–21.

14. Warfield, "Apologetics," *Works*, 9: 8–9.

15. Warfield, "The Real Problem," *Works*, 1: 218. The reader will note that Warfield is dealing with the evidence of special revelation at this point, but I think it is safe to say that if the evidence for special revelation yields only probable certainty regarding the truth of Christianity, the same could be said for natural revelation as well.

16. See below for further discussion of abstract induction.

17. Van Til noted that Warfield's use of the expression "right reason" was somewhat opaque, but he thought it yielded the notion of neutral reason shared by both believer and unbeliever alike, *Defense*, 284.

18. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 598.

consciousness adds to on an ongoing basis throughout the centuries, the fact of the matter is that the introduction of sin into the world through the fall produces an “abnormal” condition.¹⁹ There are scientists who view the world through the lens of normality assuming that the way things are is the way they have always been. Then there are scientists who have experienced palinogenesis (regeneration) that helps them to realize that the world which they explore has been ruptured by sin and is in the process of being redeemed. The antithesis between belief and unbelief leads to the development of two sciences, although Kuyper recognizes that ideally there is only one science.²⁰

Kuyper talks in terms of two principles, the natural and the special principle.²¹ The natural principle is the principle of unbelief, of human autonomy and normalcy. It not only leaves God and his revelation out of the picture but also adamantly opposes Christian approaches to the scientific endeavor. There are then at least two aspects to the natural principle: a truncated view of reality and a hateful disposition toward God and his revelation.²² In opposition to the natural principle stands the special principle. The special principle is another way of talking about the *principia* of theology, although the emphasis here falls on only one aspect of these. Christian theology is understood (and Kuyper spends a fair bit of time explicating this himself) to rest upon or derive from two principia: the *principium essendi* (principle of being) which is God himself and the *principium cognoscendi* (principle of knowing). The latter principle is further subdivided

19. Kuyper, *Principles*, 220. See also his discussion in his *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 132–136.

20. Kuyper, *Principles*, 92, 152, 156. On the unity of truth, 155.

21. Kuyper, *Principles*, 368–389. Also noted in Van Til, *Defense*, 260–261.

22. Kuyper, *Principles*, 380–389. I should note that Warfield seems to stress the first and neglect the second aspect.

23. Kuyper does discuss a formal type of faith defined as trust in one’s senses as one does science that is true for the believer and unbeliever. I will have more to say about this below. Kuyper is talking about formal faith here in his discussion of the special principle. See his *Principles*, 341–348, especially 347–348.

24. This is Kuyper’s way of pointing out that the special principle is an eschatological intrusion into the fallen world. See his *Principles*, 344–348. Van Til will comment upon the accidental nature of the special principle, especially as it is contrasted with the “gradational principle” exemplified in Thomas Aquinas’ approach to natural revelation, *Defense*, 262–263.

25. See Kuyper, *Principles*, 157–159.

26. This is not to be confused with the Roman Catholic doctrine of “formed faith.”

27. Kuyper, *Principles*, 125–146.

28. See Van Til, *Defense*, 286–290.

into the *principium cognoscendi internum* (internal principle) which is faith wrought in the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit, and the *principium cognoscendi externum* (external principle) which is Holy Scripture. For Kuyper, the emphasis in his discussion of the antithesis falls upon the effect of faith on the mind of the believer engaged in the task of science.²³ The unbeliever does not possess this faith or special principle and so there is an opposition between belief and unbelief in the realm of science. In addition, the special principle is, according to Kuyper, accidental. That is, it reflects God’s response to the introduction of sin and abnormality into his otherwise good creation.²⁴

While Kuyper describes the antithesis in absolute terms, as we see in (K2), he does allow for aspects of science that are not affected by the fall such as weighing, measuring and the use of logic.²⁵ And he allows for a neutral zone within the context of common grace where believers and unbelievers can meet with equality and determine common principles of knowledge. This may be related to his territorial view of common grace in which spatial analogies govern. Van Til will improve on Kuyper with his temporal or historical formulation of the doctrine of common grace. Another factor in Kuyper’s apparent inconsistency here may be his discussion of a formal faith.²⁶ Kuyper wants to account for why we believe in the existence of ourselves (“ego”) and in the trustworthiness of the delivery of the senses. He wants to explain how it is that we can know things. In other words, Kuyper is discussing the subject/object relationship and developing his epistemological theory.²⁷ Van Til’s problem with this discussion is Kuyper’s apparent failure to include in his consideration of epistemology the place of God in the whole process. Particularly Van Til notes Kuyper’s failure to bring into the discussion the *sensus divinitatus* which pervades all human knowledge. There can be no awareness of ourselves without an immediate awareness of our Creator and there can be no awareness of objects outside the mind without an awareness of their Creator as well.²⁸ Kuyper’s concern is with the fact that we cannot successfully demonstrate the existence of an “I” nor can we explain why it is we trust the deliverances of senses. We must have faith in our own existence and in our senses. However, Van Til is correct to note that this faith is not an answer to skepticism when abstracted from God and the covenantal context of creation and revelation.

As far as the exceptions to the antithesis for which Kuyper allows, the question remains: why does he allow for the exceptions of weighing, measuring, and the use of logic and why does he have a notion of common

grace which allows him to have a limited neutral zone? His discussion of how the physical sciences differ from the spiritual sciences may enter in here.²⁹ Kuyper sees the very physicality of the objects of physical science constraining how we are to understand them. Kuyper's larger discussion of the differences between the physical or natural sciences and the spiritual sciences revolves around the subject/object distinction.

In the physical sciences, the physical object constrains the notions the subject has about it to a greater extent than the object of the spiritual science. Kuyper here is neither denying the real existence of spiritual objects as over against physical objects, nor is he suggesting that there is no subjective element involved in the assessment of physical objects in the natural sciences—quite to the contrary. In both the natural (i.e., physical) and spiritual sciences, there exists both the object and the subject. The difference has to do with the physicalness of the object of the natural sciences and how that in itself somehow constrains the subjective element in the understanding of what Kuyper calls “elements” and “relations” in the human mind, with its corresponding “representations” and “conceptions.” The object of the spiritual science (say, the soul in psychology) is not tangible (although no less real for that fact) and so there is greater room for the subjective element to be creative.³⁰

If this is a fair and accurate reading of Kuyper's epistemology, then one can see how he might see the antithesis working itself out in greater detail in the spiritual sciences than in the natural sciences. In other words, things like weighing and measuring are very physical activities that can be checked and verified quite easily and believers and unbelievers use the same procedures. While logic would seem to be closer to the spiritual science, it is, I believe, what he would call a “mixed science” insofar that once a thought is put down on paper it becomes physical and can be checked. It would seem to be the case that Kuyper's area of limited neutrality and the practices of measuring, weighing and use of logic overlap at this point. Van Til recognizes that logic, for instance, has not been obliterated by the fall. But it has been affected nonetheless.

Given Kuyper's emphasis on the absolute nature of the antithesis, it is not surprising that he would think that apologetics had little value or that it had a minor role to play within the theological encyclopedia (K3).³¹ Since belief and unbelief operate on different principles (the natural on the one hand, and the spiritual on the other), there is no point in entering into debate or dialogue. At first it might appear that Kuyper's

inconsistency of recognizing areas unaffected by the fall and the limited neutral zone within common grace might make space for apologetics. But given the very specific nature of areas not affected by the fall or the limited neutral zone (assuming that these are not the same or don't overlap in some way), apologetics would seem to have no room in which to move around. Kuyper does have a place for apologetics though. He sees it as a way for Christianity to respond to philosophical challenges and within his theological encyclopedia he places it as a subdivision of the dogmatical sciences, which itself is divided from the bibliological, ecclesiological, and diaconological sciences which are all part of the theological discipline.³²

Warfield, as we have already noted, is very critical of this placement. Warfield understands apologetics to be the discipline that precedes the other theological tasks, that clears and prepares the ground for exegesis, historical theology, systematics, and practical theology. Warfield calls theology done along the lines of this model a “grand assumption” without an apologetic that goes before them. In other words, how do we know that what we are saying bears any relationship to the truth? “Is it true?” Warfield and Kuyper are both right and wrong at this point. Kuyper is correct to note that apologetics arises from within the study of the Bible and Reformed dogmatics and is not something done apart from its content. For what God do we seek to defend or vindicate? Warfield's own understanding of apologetics leaves one in no doubt that when doing apologetics, the God defended is not, at least explicitly, the God of the Bible. He, in good classical fashion, seeks to argue for a generic deity. Once we make space for this generic deity we can then consider specific candidates for the office. However, Warfield is correct to note that apologetics needs to present the truth claims of the gospel without embarrassment.³³

VAN TIL'S CRITICAL APPROPRIATION

As I have already noted, Van Til did not reject the insights of Warfield out of hand, nor did he accept Kuyper's perspective lock, stock, and barrel. If Greg Bahnsen is correct that a proper understanding of presuppositionalism depends upon insight into how Van

29. Kuyper, *Principles*, 89–105.

30. Kuyper, *Principles*, 63–89.

31. Kuyper, *Principles*, 154 and 160.

32. See Kuyper, *Principles*, 627–639. A fuller discussion of the place of apologetics is in the untranslated volume 3 of Kuyper's *Encyclopaedia*.

33. Warfield, “Apologetics,” *Works*, 9:3, 10, 17.

Til drew upon and corrected the views of Warfield and Kuyper, then it will behoove us to look closer at Van Til's agreements and disagreements with these two Reformed stalwarts.

As previously noted, Van Til accepted what Bahnsen called the "brilliant conception of central importance" of both Warfield and Kuyper.³⁴ Warfield's major insight was that God's revelation to all men in nature and history was objective, intelligible, and clear. The problem of sinful men rejecting the evidence for God is not, then, with the evidence, but with the sinful human heart that takes the objective, intelligible, and clear revelation of God and suppresses and twists it. The unregenerate man or woman hates God and his revelation.

Kuyper's central insight builds on what we have already noted about the sinful rejection of the clear natural revelation of God. Kuyper rightfully stressed the absolute antithesis between belief and unbelief. In other words, natural revelation is never assessed by a neutral mind. The one who interacts with natural revelation is either a believer, or an unbeliever.³⁵ If, as does happen, the sinner gets something right about natural and special revelation or about God's world, it is because he is not abiding by his sinful principles or worldview. It is not because his principles or worldview are correct. They aren't. When Kuyper talks about the development of two sciences, it might be better to say that there is one true science (that which conforms to God's own being and thinking about his creation) in reality or objectively and that the two sciences are a reflection of subjective states. In other words the existence of two sciences objectively considered would yield two worlds not unlike the scenario that J. Warwick Montgomery paints in his "Once Upon an A Priori" in the Van Til festschrift *Jerusalem and Athens*.³⁶ And the principles or worldview of the unbeliever do not reflect reality or come into contact with it on their own assessment of

things. However, the unbeliever never holds his unregenerate views consistently. The two sciences are subjective states,³⁷ one which conforms more frequently with reality as constituted by God and one which never could conform on its principles to God's world but often does because the unbeliever is made in the image of God, exists in God's world that always reveals Him at every point, and lives within the context of common grace.

So Van Til accepted the two central insights of *both* the objectivity, intelligibility, and clarity of God's revelation to all men in nature and history, *and* that the antithesis between belief and unbelief in which the assessment of the evidence for God in history and nature differs between the two of them. There is but one true science (that which conforms to God's being and knowledge on an analogical level) objectively considered (*i.e.* as an extra-mental reality), but there are two sciences subjectively considered (the believer seeks, albeit imperfectly, to conform his scientific thinking to God's Word and world and the unbeliever seeks to deny God's Word and world, but cannot do it successfully).

Van Til, however, rejected Warfield's notion of the evidence leading only to probability³⁸ and his confidence in "right reason" as understood as a neutral capacity to properly assess God's natural and special revelation. With Warfield, Van Til affirmed the necessity of apologetics, although his understanding of apologetics differed significantly from that proposed by Warfield. Warfield's classical method shaped apologetics in the mold of natural theology, apparently unconstrained by Scripture. Warfield's approach was for apologetics to precede theology and so clear the field for the unfolding of the theological encyclopedia. Also, it would appear as if Warfield and Van Til are in agreement that Christianity cannot be defended on a piecemeal basis. However, while denying a detail by detail defense of the faith,³⁹ Warfield apparently found his two-stage classical method (what Van Til called the "block house" method) which defends a generic theism on philosophical grounds and then follows that up with an inductive examination of the historical evidences of Christianity consistent with his previous denial. Van Til, I believe, would challenge the abstract nature of both stages of this apologetic. With Kuyper, Van Til would affirm that apologetics is an integral part of the theological enterprise and cannot be carried on in abstraction from the theology it seeks to vindicate. Apologetics does not go before theology in the sense of being done in a non-committal fashion (*i.e.*, in the sense of allowing for abstract possibility). Apologetics must seek to defend Christianity and not some generic

34. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597.

35. The unbeliever also attempts to judge the special principle according to his skewed view of natural revelation.

36. See E. R. Geehan, ed. *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions of the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1971), 380–392.

37. By stressing the subjectivity of the two sciences, I do not intend to deny the objective nature of the scholarship produced by unregenerate scientists. In other words, this "science" is objective in an extra-mental sense, but where unbelieving science gets things right it is parasitic of God-conforming science and where it is wrong it conforms to no thing.

38. See below for further discussion of the problems of a neutral method of induction which Warfield seems to embrace which leads to an abstract notion of probability.

39. See Warfield, "Apologetics," *Works*, 9: 9.

or vague natural theology that could have just as easily been formulated by an ancient Greek philosopher.⁴⁰ However, this stress on the biblical basis and systematic theological consistency of apologetics shows that Van Til moves away from Kuyper in Kuyper's diminution of the apologetic task.⁴¹

SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

At this point in the article I would like us to reflect on some of the issues that have been raised in this survey of Van Til's critical appropriation of Benjamin B. Warfield and Abraham Kuyper. First, in considering Warfield, I have tried to be consistent in describing Warfield's apologetic method as "classical." That is, Warfield followed the two-stage method in which he first dealt with the questions of the existence of a god, the possibility of the communication between this god and man, and the nature of man to be able to receive divine communication within a philosophical context apparently divorced from any Scriptural considerations; then, after laying this groundwork, he looks at the historical evidence of Scripture to see if it is indeed such a divine communication as he showed was possible in the first stage of the method. With all due respect to Warfield, he too easily conflates natural theology with natural revelation.⁴² Natural theology done in abstraction from special revelation must of necessity be skewed by the sinful mind of the unregenerate man or woman who formulates it. In other words, Warfield has attributed the objectivity, intelligibility, and clarity which properly belong to natural revelation to natural theology. This is not to reject natural theology. It is to recognize the difference between God's revelation as such and man's possibly fallible and sinful interpretation of it. I can't imagine Warfield confusing the Bible with an interpretation of it. Even the Westminster Standards, which are arguably the most faithful exposition of Scripture in confessional and catechetical form, are not infallible. We know the difference between the Bible and a theology derived from it.⁴³ In the end Warfield has problems with both parts of his classical method.

Not only does Warfield have problems with his approach to the first part of his classical apologetical approach, but ghosts haunt his approach to the evidence as well. Van Til has accused Warfield of operating with an abstract notion of probability.⁴⁴ What does he mean by this? I think it has to do with Warfield's notion of induction. It is generally recognized in logic textbooks that deductive logic yields certainty and inductive logic can only yield probability. Warfield moves from a defective

use of natural theology to a defective understanding of induction. If induction is abstracted from the God-given covenantal context in which God intended for it to be used, it can only ever yield probabilities since the nature of induction is to form generalizations based upon the examination of evidence. Conclusions in the nature of the case can only ever be tentative. There is always the possibility that another piece of evidence will turn up that overturns or calls into question a previously formulated theory or generalization. And the unbiblical notions of possibility and probability are, of course, unconstrained by biblical realities. However, given the reality of the God of the Scriptures, we are not worried that another piece of evidence will turn up to reveal a world best described as totally naturalistic. No evidence will arise to show that Jesus wasn't raised from the dead. Warfield apparently did not recognize that he was operating with a notion of induction and possibility that denied at the outset what he was endeavoring to prove. And what about Scripture's own nature as self-authenticating? As already noted, both stages of Warfield's classical apologetic fail to live up to biblical standards of apologetic argumentation.

Before I turn to consider Abraham Kuyper, I have one final matter to consider regarding Warfield's apologetic. And that is his recurring reference to "pure reason" or "right reason." What exactly does Warfield mean by these expressions? Van Til recognizes some opacity to the terms but decides that it reflects the idea of a neutral reason. If Warfield meant that reason as originally created would recognize the revelation God has implanted in nature and history, this would not be a problem. If Warfield wanted to affirm that the fall has not totally obliterated reason, I would grant him his point. But what exactly are the nature and extent of the noetic effects of sin? When Warfield discusses the nature

40. See Warfield's remarks in his "Apologetics" where he suggests that apologetics is not about defending Christianity as such, at least not initially. He demonstrates his view by noting the apologetics done by Greek philosophers in pre-Christian times, *Works*, 9: 16–21.

41. Kuyper's stress on worldview thinking and the antithesis was an apologetic of sorts. Kuyper's involvement with the anti-revolutionary party in the Netherlands could surely be seen as a practical form of apologetics as well.

42. Van Til, *Christian Theory*, 231.

43. I am not suggesting that theology or doctrinal formulations cannot accurately reflect the teaching of the Bible. Indeed I think they can and do. We are able to discern more and less biblical systems of doctrine by comparison of them with Scripture itself. The fact that it is a comparison means that they are not one and the same thing. Additionally, granting the potential of human fallibility generally does not prove an error in any particular instance.

44. Van Til, *Defense*, 265.

of science, he tends to stress the incomplete nature of unbelieving science but appears to slight the reality of active rebellion. If Warfield was arguing that regenerate or restored reason would readily recognize both natural and special revelation, that's fine; there is room here for discussion. Paul Helseth has recently argued that the Old Princeton theologians were not the bald rationalists that they have been accused of being.⁴⁵ He has written on Hodge, Warfield, and Machen, making the argument that all of these men had an understanding of the soul; or human personality as an integrated whole so that "right reason" must be regenerate reason. Helseth has pointed to the article "Authority, Intellect, Heart" by Warfield to prove his point.⁴⁶ Granting that Helseth is correct in his reassessment of Warfield, what do we do with Warfield's use of the classical approach to apologetics? If Warfield understood right reason to be regenerate reason, it makes his apologetic method all the more enigmatic, not less so. It may be that Warfield's inconsistency is more complex than we have thought. Clearly there is room for further research here.

Now to Abraham Kuyper. As we come to this point in the article, we should be disabused of the idea that Van Til totally rejected Warfield and wholly accepted Kuyper. Not so. Kuyper was correct in recognizing that the antithesis between belief and unbelief is absolute in principle. However, he apparently failed to understand how the antithesis worked out in history. Kuyper works with a territorial view of the antithesis and common grace. I suspect this sets up a see-saw relationship between the two so that Kuyper has to account for what

look to him like areas of neutrality or practices that are not affected by the fall. As in a war, there are zones of neutrality where enemies can meet on equal terms and come together and forge common notions of peace. I think Van Til's temporal or historical (could we not say "eschatological"?) understanding of both the antithesis and common grace are an improvement.⁴⁷ What looks to Kuyper like practices not affected by the fall (weighing, measuring, the use of logic) or like areas of neutrality are actually a reflection of our eschatological condition. That is, we have not yet reached the consummation when the principle of antithesis will be fully realized. Between the fall and the consummation, common grace is at work, and man is still made in the image of God and there is natural, not to mention special, revelation. Sin in the life of the unregenerate is restrained and so he can get some things about this world right. And the sanctification of the believer is not yet complete as well. Interestingly enough, Warfield pointed out this aspect of pre-consummation Christian life.⁴⁸ In a sense, then, Warfield was sensitive to the eschatological defect in Kuyper's territorial notions of the antithesis and common grace. It is not the case that there are neutral or unaffected areas in this fallen world. Rather, sinners recognize some true things because they can't possibly think or live consistently with their unbelief. So, the unregenerate contribute to science and other aspects of life, we might say, quite *accidentally*. In spite of themselves, and because reality in fact is as the Bible declares it to be and the Christian believes it, the unbeliever can get along in this world. On the other hand, it is impossible, given the way the world is, for the unregenerate to be correct and Christianity to be false. And so we have the beginnings of the transcendental argument.

Kuyper's discussion of a formal faith that is attributable to both the regenerate and the unregenerate is not completely mistaken. Van Til, however, is correct to note Kuyper's failure to connect our trust in the existence of our ego and the deliverances of our senses and knowledge of God. Warfield was correct to note that God's revelation in nature and history is objective, intelligible, and clear and this is given not only in creation in general but also in the very constitution of human beings. Any discussion of epistemology must include the connection between our knowledge of ourselves and our knowledge of God. It is not simply a matter of looking at the subject/object relation from a human perspective, but we must also ask what or who upholds the human epistemological situation? How do we account for our trust in our own existence and epistemological apparatus?

Continued on Page 250.

45. See his "The Apologetical Tradition of the OPC: A Reconsideration" in *WTJ* 60, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 109–129 and "B. B. Warfield's Appeal to 'Right Reason': Evidence of a 'Rather Bald Rationalism,'" in *Scottish Bulletin for Evangelical Theology* 16 (August 1998): 156–177. Related articles include "Re-Imagining the Princeton Mind: Post-conservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," in *JETS* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 427–450; "'Right Reason' and the Princeton Mind: The Moral Context," in *Journal of Presbyterian History* 77, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 13–28 and "B. B. Warfield on the Apologetic Nature of Christian Scholarship: An Analysis of His Solution to the Problem of the Relationship Between Christianity and Culture," in *WTJ* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 89–111. Many of these studies have now been compiled in the author's *Right Reason and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010). On the narrow issue of the nature of right reason I believe Helseth has made his case.

46. Warfield, *Writings*, 2: 668–671. Cited by Helseth in his "Warfield's Appeal," 156–177.

47. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1972).

48. Warfield, "Introduction," *Writings*, 2:101. Admittedly Kuyper also notes that palingenesis or sanctification is not perfect in this life, but he doesn't connect it explicitly with eschatology, *Principles*, 162.

theology in the seventeenth century. Rather, they affirm it. We used the Abrahamic covenant as a test case. The designation of the Abrahamic covenant as a covenant of grace in classic covenant theology is compatible with the concept of the covenant of royal grant, in parallel with the treaty of royal grant which was one of the two different patterns on the treaties in the ancient Near East.

We explored how the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah was redemptive judgment through holy war and separated the covenant community from the non-covenant community and corrupt world. It was a type of the final redemptive judgment at the *Parousia*. The redemptive judgment within the historical context of the Abrahamic covenant was the divine demonstration that the ultimate realization of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled with the eschatological redemptive judgment.

Through the intended sacrifice of Isaac on the altar of Mount Moriah by Abraham, we endeavored to seek the image of the Son of Man sacrificed on the altar of Golgotha. In that sense, the sacrifice of Isaac on the altar was a Messianic prophecy of how “the woman’s offspring” would come as “the Son of Man” to forgive the sins of the elect and bestow all the redemptive blessings that God promised to Abraham, including personal salvation.

We established the apostolic designation of “in Christ Jesus,” “in Christ,” and “through Christ Jesus” to note redemptive blessings, including personal salvation, adopted from the Abrahamic covenant wherein God promised redemptive blessings to Abraham and his descendants by the means of the phrases “in your offspring” and “in you.”

We endeavored to support a thesis that Abraham’s justification by faith within the historical context of the Abrahamic covenant provided for the first time in redemptive history a soteriological pattern that sinners are justified by faith apart from obedience or works of the law. Representatively, Paul used this soteriological motif after his Damascus Road conversion experience and proclaimed it for both Jews and Gentiles, as did the other apostles.■

On the Shoulder of Giants: Van Til’s Appropriation of Warfield and Kuyper. Continued from Page 146.

Finally, Kuyper was correct to connect apologetics with the other dogmatical sciences. Apologetics cannot be divorced

20. For further discussion focused specifically on the *generic* form of the transcendental argument, see my “A Dilemma For the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 2 (2009): 465–469. James Anderson provides an insightful reply to my proposed dilemma in “No Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument: A Response to David Reiter,” forthcoming in *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (2011). I reply to Anderson in “Rejoinder to Anderson,” also forthcoming in *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2011).

from the Christianity it is intended to defend or vindicate. However, he was wrong to diminish its significance. Given Van Til’s correction of Kuyper’s territorial notion of the antithesis and common grace with a temporal or eschatological view, we can now see that apologetics has an essential role to play in the proclamation of the Gospel (and in this Warfield was correct). Apologetics is no more fruitless than preaching or evangelism in this age before the consummation. Preaching and witnessing have no inherent powers to convert the sinner. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. However, the Holy Spirit uses preaching and witnessing and so can also use apologetics.

CONCLUSION

Cornelius Van Til critically appropriated the apologetic insights of both Benjamin B. Warfield and Abraham Kuyper. He accepted Warfield’s insight into the objective, intelligible, and clear revelation of God to man in nature and history. But he rejected Warfield’s abstract notion of induction and probability and what he understood to be Warfield’s notion of neutral “right reason.” Van Til agreed with Kuyper’s notion of the antithesis between belief and unbelief but he rejected the idea that there were practices unaffected by the fall or that there were neutral zones in this fallen world and he rejected Kuyper’s diminution of apologetics which resulted from his territorial notion of the antithesis and common grace. Van Til’s improvement on Kuyper’s notion of antithesis and common grace allows us to recognize the central place of the transcendental argument in presuppositional apologetics: the argument for the impossibility to the contrary.

Van Til stood on the shoulders of giants and he benefitted from the insights of Warfield and Kuyper. He saw farther and more clearly than these two Reformed stalwarts and we do them no dishonor when we recognize this. Greg Bahnsen is correct when he notes that he who understands how Van Til critically appropriated *both* Warfield and Kuyper will understand the genius of the presuppositional apologetic method.■

The Modal Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence. Continued from Page 152.

Our study has led us to distinguish the *Modal Transcendental Argument Form* from the more “generic” transcendental argument form.²⁰ Collett strongly emphasizes the desideratum that the transcendental argument should establish the necessity of God’s existence (Collett, “Van Til,” 262), but he does not clearly recognize and make explicit the modal status of the premises of the argument—this is especially true with regard to the “granted” premise of the argument. On the other hand, Choi explicitly asserts that a modal (necessity) premise is of the very essence of a transcendental argument. But he