

SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON 1 COR 2:6-16

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IN *Jerusalem and Athens* G. C. Berkouwer expressed disappointment over Van Til's criticism of his views. He had expected that "*exegesis of Holy Scripture would play a decisive role.*" Instead, not only did Van Til misunderstand him, he believed, but "of far greater consequence" was "the total lack of biblical reflection and the absence of a *reply* to all the exegetical questions."¹ In a brief response Van Til conceded Berkouwer's point. His critique of Berkouwer's theology "should have had much more exegesis in it than it has. This is a defect."² He then went on to generalize, "The lack of detailed scriptural exegesis is a lack in all of my writings. I have no excuse for this."³

This interchange highlights a frequent perception (and charge): Van Til talks repeatedly about "the Christ of the Scriptures"; his uncompromising concern is to let "the self-attesting Christ of Scripture" speak. Yet his writings provide precious little, if any, argumentation based on a careful treatment of key biblical passages; his approach is assertive and dogmatizing, rather than exegetical.

We might wonder whether Van Til was not too hard on himself and perhaps conceded too much to his critics. And have his critics read him as carefully as they might? For, more than might appear at a first glance, he was well read in the commentaries of Dutch Calvinism like the Bottenberg series, conversant with the exegetical work of his colleague John Murray, and not only knowledgeable in but thoroughly committed to the kind of biblical theology fathered by his Princeton Seminary professor and friend, Geerhardus Vos. A reflective reading of Van Til shows a mind (and heart) thoroughly permeated by Scripture; issues of its interpretation substantially shaped his thinking, if not his style of presentation.

Still, there is substance to criticism like that of Berkouwer. Van Til did not make the biblical basis for the characteristic emphases in his thought as clear as he might have; that basis needs to be made more explicit. What follows here is the effort to show some of the exegetical support for several key emphases in his epistemology.

¹ G. C. Berkouwer, in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 200, his italics. In view primarily is Van Til's *The Sovereignty of Grace: An Appraisal of G. C. Berkouwer's View of Dordt* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969).

² *Ibid.*, 203. "I wish I could have given better exegetical justification for this position than I have" (p. 204).

³ *Ibid.*

I

"It can be rightly said that Paul does nothing but explain the eschatological reality which in Christ's teachings is called the Kingdom." This perceptive observation of Herman Ridderbos⁴ is certainly applicable to 1 Cor 2:6-16. Here, if anywhere, Paul is the interpreter of Jesus; this passage is a virtual commentary on teaching preserved in Matt 11:25-27/Luke 10:21-22.⁵

The different placing of this unit in each Gospel raises questions that we may pass over here. Most likely Luke gives us the right chronology by connecting it directly with the return of the seventy[-two] ("at that same hour," ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ, v. 21; cf. v. 17). Matthew's indefinite temporal indicator, "at that time" (ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ, v. 25), probably reflects his less chronologically oriented concern at this point.

In terms of internal structure and wording the two accounts are virtually identical. The only noteworthy variation, beyond the time indicators just noted, is also found in the introductory clauses. Matthew's prosaic "Jesus answered and said" (v. 25) contrasts with Luke's "he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit⁶ and said." The latter (which might also be rendered, "jubilant in the Holy Spirit") accents the intensity of Jesus' involvement and the climactic nature of the words that follow. We are at a high point in Jesus' earthly ministry.

This passage is often cited in discussing the deity of Christ—for what it discloses about his unique identity as the Son of God and his equality in being with the Father; particularly in the past 100 years or so it has been focal in debates about the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus. Here, however, our primary interest is not in the person of Christ—the issue of his essential deity—but in what he says about the activity of Father and Son and the content of that action.⁷

1. *The Activity of Revelation: The Sola of Revelation*

In v. 21 "you have hidden" stands in stark contrast with "you have revealed" (cf. "chooses to reveal," v. 22). This contrast clearly points up the sense of this primary word for *revelation* (ἀποκαλύπτω) in the NT. What

⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 48-49. This statement strikes me as especially helpful for appreciating the overall doctrinal or didactic unity of the NT in its historically differentiated diversity.

⁵ We proceed here on the premise that, with traditioning and the redactional activity of the respective evangelists duly taken into account, this material provides us with a reliable record of what Jesus said. Authenticity is argued (on historical-critical grounds), e.g., by R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelium-Überlieferung* (WUNT 2/7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1981) 220-21, 330, 335-37, 344-45, 434, 478.

⁶ Even if τῷ ἁγίῳ is not the original reading, a reference to the [Holy] Spirit is most likely.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the verse references are to Luke's account.

is revealed is otherwise hidden, a disclosure of the previously veiled. Revelation is making known what heretofore has been unknown, kept a secret; in that sense it may be said to be an "open secret."

Further, what is revealed remains hidden from "the wise and the intelligent" (σοφῶν καὶ συνετῶν; the latter word may also be rendered "learned," "having understanding"). What is revealed, then, is beyond all human capacity and competence, whether rational or intuitive; it is inaccessible to human potential in its highest actualizations. In other words, Jesus asserts the absolute, exclusive necessity of revelation.

There is nothing here to suggest, in fact everything is decisively against, the notion that revelation is an alternate, and therefore essentially dispensable, means of communicating what could also be arrived at by the use of reason or some other human capacity. Nor is there even the slightest indication that the problem necessitating revelation is moral but not intellectual. The categories in view are cognitive; those "having understanding" are those as such, with respect to revelation, who do not and cannot *understand*.

The exclusive necessity of revelation is reinforced by the "infants," "little children" (νηπίους) as the recipients of revelation, in counterpoint to the "wise and intelligent." This reference is explicated by what Jesus teaches elsewhere: the necessity of repenting and becoming like a little child for entering the kingdom of heaven and of becoming humble like a child to be great in the kingdom (Matt 18:3-4), the necessity of receiving the kingdom like a little child in order to enter it (Mark 10:15).

In other words, Jesus speaks of the need for *faith*. Just as revelation is necessary because it does not result from human accomplishment or intellectual achievement, so the necessary condition in its recipients is faith, the receptive humility that stems from faith alone; the necessity of revelation involves the necessity of faith. In this sense there is an unbreakable correlation between (the reception of) revelation and faith.

The necessity of revelation appears from the side of the recipients, as we have seen, in their absolute dependence. But, further, the revealer is under no outside compulsion to reveal; no claim arising from the (potential) recipients necessitates revelation. Rather, the act of revealing is free, sovereign, of entirely uncoerced divine initiative; it is a matter of the Father's εὐδοκία, his "good pleasure," "purpose," "choice" (cf. Eph 1:5, 9). Correlatively, the Son does not merely reveal but "*chooses* to reveal" (v. 22; cf. what is said about the gratuitous disclosure of "the mysteries of the kingdom," Matt 13:11/Luke 8:10). Both Father and Son are sovereign in revelation, and that sovereignty is unrestricted, unqualified by anything outside themselves.

2. *The Content of Revelation: The Tota of Revelation*

The scope of what is revealed is designated here as "these things" (ταῦτα, v. 21) and "all things" (πάντα, v. 22). The word ταῦτα has no

explicit grammatical antecedent, either within the passage or the preceding verses. That suggests a looser, more general reference, back to the "things" (miracles) done by Jesus in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15). Additionally, Luke brackets the passage, on the one side (vv. 17-20), with what he intends his readers to understand as the eschatological overthrow of Satan and his rule, which Jesus perceives as having taken place in the mission of the 72. On the other side (vv. 23-24), Jesus speaks of the new realities of fulfillment experienced by the disciples ("what you see . . . what you hear"), in contrast to the old order (the "many prophets and kings").

All told, from these indications in the immediate context and within the overall framework provided by the Synoptic Gospels, we are on sound footing in saying that "these things" are, in other words, the things of the kingdom of God/heaven (cf. in the immediate context, Matt 11:11-13; Luke 10:9).

With that sort of summation the wider ramifications of this passage begin to emerge. According to the Synoptics, the kingdom of God is at once the central and all-encompassing theme of the proclamation of Jesus during his earthly ministry. As such it is not limited in scope or confined to some restricted sector or dimension of concerns. Rather, the kingdom is eschatological reality, comprehensively considered. It embodies the consummation of God's covenant—the realization of the ages-long hopes of his people, the fulfillment of the sweeping promises made to them (cf., again, 10:24). More specifically, the kingdom is a matter of the eschatological lordship of God in Jesus, the Christ, presently being realized in his arrival and to be consummated fully at his return.⁸

Consequently, "these things," as the content of revelation, are to be considered comprehensively. They are in fact "all things" (v. 22), that is, all that has its origin in the unique fellowship of knowledge between Father and Son, and is purposed by them for revelation in and by the Son (v. 22). Or, as already noted, "these things" are all that is revealed and brought to realization in the coming of the kingdom.

It might appear that this kingdom-qualification somehow limits the scope of "all things." But, to the contrary according to the NT, there is nothing in the entire creation that is irrelevant to the kingdom; absolutely nothing falls outside the eschatological rule of Christ. Availing ourselves of some Pauline commentary at this point, the reality of the kingdom is the reality of God having "placed all things under his [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church"; it is the reality, already underway, of "bringing all things, things in heaven and things on earth,

⁸ Many helpful treatments of Jesus' kingdom proclamation have appeared throughout this century. Among those of book-length some of the older ones are still the best. See H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), and the much earlier classic of G. Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God* (1903; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

under Christ as head" (Eph 1:22, 10).⁹ The kingdom of God is totalitarian, in the most ultimate sense we can know and experience. It is not a partial or part-time allegiance, involving only some of our efforts or just one sector of our experience, or merely a part of our knowledge.

The implications of Jesus' words, in context, are entirely decisive; their momentousness, though often missed, is inescapable. There is no area or dimension of human knowledge that lies outside the scope of the revelation in view in these verses, or for which that revelation is irrelevant. Any epistemological endeavor true to these verses recognizes its absolute, exclusive dependence on such revelation. To be truly "wise and learned" in the creation, one must become a "little child" and receive the revelation of God in Christ. Involved here is the epistemological ultimacy of the Creator-creature distinction, the unconditional dependence upon God of the creature made in his image, for knowing as well as being.

In sum: according to Jesus, revelation is the exclusive and comprehensive *principium* (foundation and norm) for human knowledge. In terms of classical Reformation predicates, revelation involves both a *sola* and a *tota*.

II

1. *Introductory Comments on 1 Cor 2:6-16*

As already noted, it is difficult not to see 1 Cor 2:6-16, within and including its immediate context, especially 1:26-28, as a commentary on the Matthew/Luke passage. At any rate, whatever may have been in Paul's mind as he wrote, the connection between the two is close; common themes, as we will see, tie them together.

Within the first main part of the letter (1:10-4:21),¹⁰ the section from 1:18 to 3:23 has a high order of importance in the Pauline corpus as a whole. To counter the disastrous misconception of the gospel at Corinth, which had resulted in sharp divisions within the church and an entrenched party spirit (1:10-17), Paul highlights the true nature of the division the gospel creates by drawing attention to some fundamentals of his apostolic ministry and message.

Within this passage a key word, perhaps the most prominent, is wisdom (σοφία). As we move to the end of chap. 1 and on into chap. 2, two points, among others, come to the fore.

⁹ The NIV's rendering of εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν in v. 10a, "to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment," is unfortunate because it masks that the "heading up" of all things in Christ (v. 10b) has already begun (cf. Gal 4:4).

¹⁰ We may leave to the side here the question of the basic "outline" of 1 Corinthians. More than one proposal is defensible, and no one ought to be pressed; see the various commentaries and volumes on special introduction.

(1) A clash, a sharp, unrelieved antithesis, exists between "the wisdom of God" (1:21) and the wisdom of unbelief. What has been effected by God in the cross of Christ is the transvaluation of wisdom, in fact its counter-valuation as measured by the standards of "the world," "this age" (1:20), which is constituted by unbelief and sinful rebellion. In terms of the rhetorically balanced antithetical parallelism of 1:26–28, foolishness and weakness in the eyes of the world are wisdom and power before God; conversely, what the world judges to be wise and powerful, God considers to be foolish and weak. Echoes of the contrast between the "wise and learned" and the "little children" in Matt 11:25/Luke 10:21 are unmistakable.

(2) The wisdom of God is not ultimately cognitive nor merely intellectual. Though a body of doctrinal knowledge is certainly integral to that wisdom (e.g., Rom 6:17; 2 Tim 1:13), and it would be quite perverse to deny that fact,¹¹ its controlling point of reference is Christ, who is himself "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1:24; cf. Col 2:3). Hence, the resolve "to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). Christ, in his death and resurrection, is Paul's ultimate epistemic commitment.¹²

2. *The Background of 1 Cor 2:6–16*

Worth noting is the recent, salutary turn in the interpretation of 2:6–16 within the historical-critical tradition. With the rise of the history-of-religions approach toward the close of the last century the view emerged and eventually became more or less standard, especially in German scholarship, that this passage reflects the basic outlook of the Hellenistic mystery religions of Paul's day. Following Wilhelm Bousset, Rudolf Bultmann proved especially influential in his *Sachkritik* of 2:6ff.: Paul has betrayed himself by a disastrous accommodation to the thought-world of gnosticism; the cross-based concept of "wisdom" in 1:18–26 may not be made the basis for interpreting the mystery-concept of "wisdom" in 2:6ff., because the two are not merely at odds but fundamentally irreconcilable.

More recent exegesis, however, has questioned this assessment. The consensus forming in the past couple of decades is that 2:6–16 has its background in the merging of wisdom and apocalyptic traditions, primarily within Hellenistic Judaism, which Paul interprets Christologically, in the

¹¹ Suffice it here to say that Kantian/post-Kantian polarizings of rational and personal knowledge, of whatever variety—modern or postmodern—are foreign to Paul.

¹² Care must be taken not to read a narrow, one-sided theology of the cross out of (or into) 2:2. It has to be connected with equally sweeping and aphoristic assertions like 2 Tim 2:8: "Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead, . . . according to my gospel." On balance, the center of Paul's gospel ("of first importance") is Christ's death and resurrection in their significance as the fulfillment of Scripture (1 Cor 15:3–4), entailing ultimately the soteriological-eschatological renewal of nothing less than the entire creation (2 Cor 5:17).

light of the cross and resurrection. According to this view, 2:6-16 expand on and do not contradict "the word of the cross" in 1:18ff. It is now widely accepted, and so need not be argued here, that the passage is a direct, even essential, continuation of the previous argumentation with its basic antithetical theme.¹³ So far as the internal flow of the passage is concerned, Stuhlmacher's proposal is persuasive: vv. 6a and 6b set the direction so that, in chiasmic sequence, vv. 7-9 expand on 6b, vv. 10-16 on 6a; in this way 2:6-16 enlarge on 1:18-25 especially.¹⁴

3. *God's Wisdom as Eschatological (2:6-9)*¹⁵

The antithesis created by the wisdom/foolishness of gospel preaching is nothing less than eschatological in its dimensions. That sweep, intimated already in chap. 1 in references to "the disputant of this age" (v. 20) and "the wisdom of the [= this; cf. 3:19] world" (vv. 20-21), is accented beginning in 2:6: the wisdom spoken to believers, identified as the τέλειοι,¹⁶ is "not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away," along with this world-age in its entirety (cf. 7:31).

The background here, of course, is the contrast between the two aeons, coined within intertestamental Judaism and taken up by Paul and other NT writers—a comprehensive conceptual framework that, as it encompasses the whole of history from creation to consummation, accents its eschatological τέλος.¹⁷ The plain implication, then, of vv. 6, 7 and 9 (whatever

¹³ This brief overview is largely based on the survey of P. Stuhlmacher, "The Hermeneutical Significance of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987) 330-32; see also, e.g., the discussion of the passage in F. Lang, *Die Briefe an die Korinther* (NTD 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 38-48, and W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (EKKNT 8/1; Zürich: Benziger, 1991) 242-45, 268-69; cf., among English-language treatments, the similar stance of G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 99-101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁵ Among the considerable secondary literature pertinent to this section I mention esp. W. D. Dennison, *Paul's Two-Age Construction and Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985) esp. pp. 55-85, a work with the same emphases as this section.

¹⁶ The rendering of this word with "mature" in most recent translations, though apparently supported by Paul's usage of the word elsewhere (e.g., 14:20; Phil 3:15), blunts and relativizes Paul's eschatological point here, better captured by "perfect," "complete." At any rate, in view is not their (relative) subjective spiritual and moral condition. Rather, the thought is along the lines of the definitive sanctification "in Christ" affirmed of the whole church in 1:2. Related to that, the τέλειοι are not just some in the church in distinction from the rest—an in-group of gnostic-like initiates—but all believers as such: those, as Paul has just said (v. 5), whose "faith rest[s] not on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Beyond the commentaries, see esp. the excellent discussion of P. J. Du Plessis, *TEAEIOΣ: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 178-85, 204-5, 242-43.

¹⁷ Among the best discussions of this commonly recognized state of affairs is still G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 1-41.

the source of the supporting citation in the latter)¹⁸ is that "God's wisdom" (v. 7), granted to believers, is of the aeon to come, the new and final age; it is, in a word, eschatological wisdom.¹⁹

Verse 8, which expands on the negative point of v. 6b, is to be read in that light: "... which [God's mystery-wisdom] none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." While "the rulers of this age" may have in view primarily those directly responsible for the crucifixion (cf. the specific mention of Herod and Pontius Pilate in Acts 4:27), there is surely a broader association with the wise, powerful, and well-born (εὐγενεῖς) in 1:26-28 (cf. 1:20).²⁰ The rulers of this age are representative; in them we see the most impressive achievements of the present world-order, measured by the standards of human rebellion and unbelief; within the creation, as presently subject to the curse on sin (cf. Rom 8:18-22), they exemplify the most that it has to offer and is capable of attaining.

All the more striking, then, is Paul's disqualification of the rulers of this age, in the face of the age-to-come, eschatological wisdom of the gospel. Moreover, the specific terms of this disqualification are clear: they do not *understand* the gospel; their failure is not only moral but epistemological (a point we will see made even more emphatically in v. 14). Coming to light in this passage, therefore, is the epistemological difference between believers and unbelievers, a difference of the most radical and far-reaching sort, in that—it does not go too far to say—believers and unbelievers belong to two different worlds; they exist in not only separate but antithetical "universes of discourse."

Such rhetoric is subject to distortion and must be qualified—as Paul in fact does. In the period until Christ's return, the two aeons overlap,²¹ so that in terms of psycho-physical makeup ("in the body," as "outer man," e.g., 2 Cor 4:10, 16) believers continue to exist in the present, sinful aeon (in that respect their resurrection is still a future hope; see esp. 1 Cor 15:35ff.). Until then they must not suppose (as Paul's opponents at Corinth apparently did) that they are beyond or can override the eschatological *Vorbehalt* of 1 Cor 13:12 ("now we see but a poor reflection").

But such reservations, along with the anthropological complexities undeniably involved, must not obscure that at the core of their being

¹⁸ See, e.g., Fee, *First Corinthians*, 108f.

¹⁹ Despite what might be the surface impression from the language employed ("wisdom in a mystery," "hidden"), v. 7 is not a lapse into the thought-world of gnosticism. If anything, Paul uses (proto-)gnostic terminology here and elsewhere (e.g., the ψυχικός-πνευματικός distinction in vv. 13-14) to make a decidedly antignostic point; cf. Rom 16:25-26; Col 1:26. On Paul's redemptive-historical, eschatological understanding of μυστήριον, see esp. H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975) 46-49.

²⁰ For a brief but, in my judgment, incisive and convincing refutation of the view that the "rulers" are demonic powers, see Fee, *First Corinthians*, 103-4; cf. J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 2.254.

²¹ See, e.g., Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 36-41, including the diagrams in n. 45.

("heart," as "inner man," e.g., Rom 2:29; 2 Cor 4:16) believers are "alive from the dead" (Rom 6:13) and so, as already raised with Christ (Eph 2:5-6; Col 2:13; 3:1), are presently within the eschatological "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). More particularly, such qualifications as are necessary must not be used to tone down the unrelieved antithesis between "the wisdom of God" and "the wisdom of the world" in this passage, nor to soften the nothing less than aeonic clash between them. Again, fundamentally believers and unbelievers are in two different worlds.

With the gospel (and its implications) as the point of reference, there is no point of contact epistemologically between believers and unbelievers, however understood—whether by empirical observation or by rational reflection and speculation ("Jews require signs, Greeks seek wisdom," 1:22—the exclusion intended is universal). The notion of such a common ground or capacity, rational or otherwise, that can be used to build toward the gospel, or otherwise prepare and dispose unbelievers to accept its truth, is not only not present in this passage; it is alien to it, jarringly so.

Clear enough here already, in other terms, is what v. 10a states ("but God has revealed it to us"): God's wisdom is revelation and is as such (as in the Matt 11/Luke 10 passage) not merely an alternative track, another, second way of arriving at knowledge that human beings are otherwise quite capable of achieving on their own. God's wisdom-revelation, focused in the cross of Christ, is beyond the human competence and capacity to grasp and determine, whatever the means—reason, intuition, observation, or feeling.

4. *The Activity of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:10-16)*

Seen as commentary on Matt 11:25-27/Luke 10:21-22, these verses advance our understanding in a significant respect. The Gospels pericope speaks of the activity of Father and Son. Here there is an added emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit. All told, the trinitarian character of revelation emerges.

Verses 10b-16 are fairly seen in large part as expanding on "through the Spirit" in v. 10a, which picks up on "in the demonstration of the Spirit and power" in v. 4 (the first explicit reference to the Spirit in the letter). There already the Spirit's activity is set in opposition to this-age, human wisdom (v. 5).

This emphasis on the Spirit, it needs to be appreciated, does not move us beyond but continues and even reinforces the eschatological dimension of the argument. Paul's overall conception of the work of the Holy Spirit is decidedly eschatological.²² That may be seen, briefly, from the metaphors

²² This has become widely recognized in this century; see, e.g., G. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 803-26, and G. Vos' 1912 essay, well ahead of its time, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of Spirit," reprinted in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings*

he uses for the Spirit at work in believers: "deposit" on our eschatological inheritance and the resurrection body (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14), "first-fruits" toward the resurrection body (Rom 8:23). Also, the adjective "spiritual" (having reference to the work of the Spirit) is the single, comprehensive designation not only of the resurrection body (1 Cor 15:44) but the entire eschatological order (v. 46). For Paul, in short, inherent in the soteriological activity of the Spirit are "the powers of the age to come" (as the writer of Hebrews says, 6:5).

Verses 10-16 bring out the comprehensive role of the Spirit in revelation. He initiates both the giving and receiving of revelation; he is both knower and communicator. Verses 10-11 address the former. The Spirit functions in revelation because he has the requisite investigative competence. He (alone) has the capacity for the comprehensive probing and searching (ἐραυνᾷ) adequate to "all things," including "even the deep things of God." He is an omniscient investigator.

Verse 11 offers a supporting argument from analogy, involving a word-play on πνεῦμα—argument from the lesser to the greater, from our experience to the issue at hand. "The spirit of man which is within him" is an anthropological use of πνεῦμα—one of the terms Paul uses for the inner side of human personality, referring to self-consciousness and self-awareness, the self as knowing and willing.²³

The basic point of v. 11 is to compare the unique self-knowledge of God to the unique knowledge each of us has of ourselves. Just as no one knows me, with my concerns ("the things of man"), as I know myself, from the inside out, so no one knows God, with his concerns ("the things of God"—referring here primarily to his wisdom revealed in Christ), as he does. Specifically, the Spirit of God is viewed here as the principle of self-knowledge in God. (This is for the sake of the analogy with the human πνεῦμα and with a view to the stress on the Spirit's activity in the immediate context, not to exclude Father and Son from this self-knowledge.) Verse 11 also shows that the Spirit's searching and probing (v. 10) is not permanently without resolution. It is not some sort of open-ended divine search without end. As a "discovering" it is simultaneously a possession.

Consequently, the Spirit is not only the principle of knowledge in God but also (vv. 12-13) the principle and means for communicating that knowledge. The Spirit now comes into view as given to and indwelling believers ("we have received . . ."), specifically so that they may understand "the things freely given to us by God." The latter has a comprehensive reference; they are "the things of God" (v. 12) determined for revelation, God's eschatological gospel-wisdom centered in Christ's cross

of Geerhardus Vos (ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 91-125; see also Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 162-66.

²³ See Ridderbos, *Paul*, 117ff., esp. 120-21.

and resurrection (vv. 2, 6-9), or, in terms of Matthew 11/Luke 10, "these things" of the kingdom of God.

"The spirit of the world" only occurs here in Paul (and the rest of the NT). Despite what might be an initial impression, the reference is almost surely not to Satan as "the God of this age" (2 Cor 4:4) or to some other spiritual being. Rather, it is coined to sharpen the antithesis to the Spirit and his eschatological activity. The phrase captures the world, as humanity in rebellion against God (cf. 1:20, 21, 27, 28; 2:6b, 8), with the attitudes and standards that characterize it as a whole. It seems close to the *φρόνημα* ("mind-set," "disposition," "attitude") of the flesh set in opposition to that of the Spirit in Rom 8:6. As we speak of "the spirit of the times" or "the spirit" that controls a culture, so here Paul speaks in effect, sweepingly, of "the spirit of this world-age." This serves to point up, once again, the inability of sinful humanity, the constitutional incompetence of sinners in themselves to attain to a true knowledge of God, and so the absolute necessity of the revelation through the Spirit in view.

Verse 13 expands on the Spirit's revelatory role as that involves the apostle. "We," inclusive of all believers in vv. 10 and 12, now distinguishes Paul from them (as in vv. 6, 7).²⁴ His speaking is a function of the Spirit's controlling activity; his words are not human, this-age wisdom but gospel-wisdom, "taught by the Spirit." The participial clause at the end, whatever its exact meaning,²⁵ accents this didactic activity of the Spirit.²⁶

Verses 14-16 focus on the response to revelation—the believer's Spirit-worked reception of the apostle's Spirit-taught words. In so doing they put that response in the most fundamental possible perspective. Here—again and in emphatic, antithetic fashion—emerge the twin factors of exclusiveness and comprehensiveness, the *sola* and *tota* of revelation. Only two responses are possible: acceptance or rejection; there is no middle ground, not even a temporizing third alternative.²⁷ This unrelieved state of affairs is

²⁴ Although, by implication, other apostles—and even all believers, when they faithfully communicate apostolic teaching—are in view.

²⁵ For the exegetical issues involved, see, e.g., Fee, *First Corinthians*, 114-15.

²⁶ It is hardly correct to argue that throughout this passage Paul's dominant interest is the Spirit's activity, through him, in producing Scripture (as does W. C. Kaiser, "A Neglected Text in Bibliology Discussions: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," *WTJ* 43 [1981] 301-19; see the pertinent rejoinder of Fee, *First Corinthians*, 112-13 n. 63). At the same time, however, there are important implications for the doctrine of inspiration in v. 13—on the justified assumption that it applies to what the apostle writes as well as to what he says. Striking here, particularly with a view to ongoing debate about the doctrine of Scripture, is that the specific *content* of Paul's message is *not* directly in view. Rather, it is considered in a purely *formal* fashion, and then not merely as resulting from a revelatory encounter or in terms of underlying ideas or promptings but as a *plurality of words*. The *words* of Paul, as such and ultimately considered, are not of human origin but inculcated by the Spirit.

²⁷ Contrary to the persistent, widespread misreading of 3:1, where Paul tells Corinthian believers ("brothers") that he must address them not as *πνευματικοίς* but as *σαρκίνοις*, and of v. 3, where he calls them *σαρκικοί*. In 3:1-3 Paul is not seeking to rationalize or even concede as normal a two-level distinction between spiritual and carnal Christians. Whatever

captured by the contrast between ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος and ὁπνευματικός—again, a distinction that, without exception, covers every hearer.

The former, as Paul's only other pairing of these Greek adjectives (15:44, 46) makes clearer, is "living ψυχή" (15:45a), that is, everyone who bears the image of the first Adam (v. 49a), who now, since the Fall (Rom 5:12ff.), is under the control of sin with its enervating and corrupting consequences (15:42–43; cf. vv. 21–22). As such this person is devoid of the Spirit ("the man without the Spirit," NIV) and so "does not accept the things of God's Spirit." In fact, "to him," that is, in terms of the standards of this age to which he is committed, God's wisdom-revelation is (demonstrable) "foolishness" (cf. 1:27).

What Paul goes on to say about this person must not be overlooked: "he cannot understand them." It is not simply that such persons will not or refuse to accept what they right well know to be true. No, they won't because they can't. Expressed here is a total cognitive inability, an incapacity that exists "because they [the things of the Spirit] are spiritually discerned," that is, they are properly appraised and assessed only through the Spirit's activity. Here, again, is the unbridgeable epistemological gulf between this age and the age to come, the yawning, nothing less than eschatological chasm between belief and unbelief. Calvin's pungent comment on 1:20 comes to mind: faced with God's revelation, the unbeliever is like an ass at a concert.²⁸

With this negative description the positive side of the picture is already coming into view. Revelation is understood only where the Spirit provides the requisite discernment. Unmistakably, so far as the granting and receiving of God's wisdom are concerned, we are shut up within the closed circle of the Spirit's working.

Verse 15 makes that explicit. "The one who is spiritual" is such because indwelt, renewed, enlightened, directed by the Holy Spirit.²⁹ Such persons,

slight semantic difference there may be between the two adjectives used on the one side of the contrast, both may be translated "fleshly" and are parallel to ψυχικός in 2:14. ("Here ψυχή approaches the second meaning of σάρξ, namely flesh as existence turned away from God," according to J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Beknopte gereformeerde dogmatiek* [Kampen: Kok, 1992] 323.) The specific reason that Paul must write as he does is because of the presence of "jealousy and quarreling" (ζήλος καὶ ἐρις)—a combination (in reverse sequence) that occurs elsewhere in Paul only in describing "the works of the flesh" (Gal 5:19), in sharp opposition (vv. 16–17) to "the fruit of the Spirit" (vv. 22–23), and "the works of darkness," in conflict with "the weapons of light" (Rom 13:12–13). The point of the imagery in vv. 1c–2, then, is not that in their immature behavior the Corinthians, regrettably but as must be expected, are acting like young, low-level Christians, but that they are not acting like Christians at all. Their behavior is the flat antithesis of Christian conduct; the figurative language points to abnormal, deformed development and likely carries the nuance "infantile," "puerile"—in that sense, "childish." Sin is sin wherever it is found, even in God's people.

²⁸ "... atque asinus ineptus est ad symphoniam" (John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia* [Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–98] 49.325).

²⁹ By now the long-standing effort ought to have been put to rest to enlist this passage in support of an anthropological trichotomy (with πνευματικός here referring to the human

believers, are transformed by the Spirit so that they are enabled to do what *ψυχικός άνθρωπος* cannot. They are granted the Spirit-worked capacity for appraisal and discernment so that, however imperfectly and even inadequately (13:12), they can truly understand God's revelation and know it for what it is. In other words, the believer is taken up into the "closed circle" of the Spirit's activity.

Along with the exclusiveness of the Spirit's activity, the comprehensiveness of that activity, the *total* of revelation, also comes out in v. 15. The discernment produced by the Spirit contemplates *πάντα*, "all things." This echoes *πάντα* as the object of the Spirit's searching activity in v. 10. Both, in turn, pick up on the *πάντα* in Matt 11:27/Luke 10:22, discussed above with its implications.

Paul's point is not that *ὁ πνευματικός*, by the Spirit, transcends every human limitation and so shares in God's exhaustive self-knowledge. Nor is he suggesting that believers have expert, encyclopedic knowledge in every area of human investigation—as if they know all there is to know about God, self, and the universe. Becoming a Christian does not make one some sort of super "renaissance man."

At the same time, however, we must not tone down this passage or domesticate Paul's *πάντα*. His point is hardly that revelation is restricted in its relevance to only a part of life, or, following Kant, that it concerns only the moral-religious dimension of human experience. Rather, God's eschatological wisdom, focused in Christ's cross and resurrection, is still in view here and elaborates Jesus' sweeping kingdom vision in Matthew 11/Luke 10. Such wisdom, Paul is saying, has a bearing on, in fact is essential for, a true knowledge of everything there is to know about God, ourselves, and the world.

The sense of this Spirit-worked assessment of *πάντα*—the full, comprehensive proportions involved—is further pointed up by the use of Isa 40:13 in v. 16. The reference to the nonderivative "mind of the Lord," God as ultimate knower, brings into view as well a context (vv. 12–31) that, in the Scripture at Paul's disposal, is difficult to match for rhetorical sweep and power as a description of God's sovereign, all-inclusive control of everything that transpires in the universe.

To that Paul adds, as the concluding note of the passage, "But we have the mind of Christ." To have "the Spirit who is from God" (v. 12), without overlooking the consequences and qualifications already made in vv. 13–15, is to have "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9) and so, too, the *νοῦς* of Christ,³⁰—the exalted Christ, "in whom" as "the mystery of God" now revealed in the church, "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:2–3). This link in comprehensive scope between the

πνεῦμα come to its revived ascendancy); see J. Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977) 2.23–33, esp. 23–29.

³⁰ On this interchange of *πνεῦμα* and *νοῦς*, note that the Hebrew of Isa 40:13 has "רוח of the Lord." The LXX reads *νοῦν κυρίου* (but in other ways the citation differs; the citation in Rom 11:34 varies from both the Hebrew and the LXX, as well as 1 Cor 2:16); see E. E. Ellis,

nonderivative knowledge of God and the Spirit-derived, Christ-centered wisdom of the gospel emerges yet again in the rhetorical flourish with which the larger section closes: "For πάντα are yours, . . . πάντα are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (3:21-23).

A controlling viewpoint in this passage—a theistic, fully trinitarian point—is that the saving revelation of God in Christ, taught by the Holy Spirit, is the indispensable key to rightly understanding God himself, and, with that understanding, literally everything (πάντα) in his creation. Right knowledge is saving knowledge. Anything else, every other knowledge—no matter how operationally effective or functionally productive—is essentially misunderstanding.

A final comment, on v. 15b (note, again, how sweeping the assertion is): "he [i.e., the one who is spiritual] is subject to appraisal [i.e., judgment]³¹ by no one." Obviously, this is not an assertion of (fideistic) autonomy or individualistic independence. Rather, in context, Paul is affirming that the believer submits to no ultimate authority—other than to the Spirit of God working with the revelation of God, and to authority legitimately deriving from that unbreakable bond between Word and Spirit (to say it with the Reformation). Here again, in other terms, is the reality of enclosure within the sovereign circle of the Spirit's activity. For Paul, this "bondage" to the Spirit is in fact the only real freedom and integrity, intellectual or otherwise, a human being can know (cf. Rom 6:15-22).

III

1 Cor 1:17-3:22/4:21 is a significant apostolic *apologia*. In it come to expression specific convictions decisive for the matrix of thought that shapes Paul's teaching as a whole and in every aspect; nowhere in the Pauline corpus are his basic concerns more on the line than here. This is the thought-matrix that captured Dr. Van Til. These basic concerns were his, too. No passage of Scripture, especially the closed circle of the Spirit's work in 2:10-16, has had a more determinative impact on his life and thought. In his time, in a singular and most resolute fashion, he contended for this and related truth.³²

In his life-long efforts, radiating an evident love for Christ and his church, he challenged two fronts primarily: (1) the mainstream of modern and contemporary theology, flowing from the Enlightenment with its commitment to rational autonomy and "historical-critical" *Sachkritik* of

Paul's Use of the Old Testament (1957; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 12 n. 10, 20 n. 5, 151, 174f.

³¹ Paul's use of ἀνακρίνω, with its semantic possibilities, in vv. 14-15 is difficult, if not impossible, to capture in English translation.

³² There are numerous places throughout his writings where Van Til sets out his basic concerns; perhaps the best brief statement, coming toward the close of his career, is "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, 3-21.

Scripture;³³ and (2) coming closer to home, the conventional apologetics of Christian orthodoxy committed to the notion of a rationally-grounded natural theology, its essential tenets held in common by believer and unbeliever alike and serving as an adequate basis for convincing unbelievers of the distinctive truths of Christianity. These fronts, in light of the epistemological considerations from Scripture brought out above, prompt several further observations.

1. *The Gospel and Human Wisdom*

Virtually from its beginning the church has wrestled with the implications of this passage for determining the relationship of the gospel to non-Christian knowledge and reasoning.³⁴ Consequently, there is a long line of efforts (e.g., as early as Clement of Alexandria, Aquinas and the medieval synthesis, Kant in the modern era) to define the scope of what Paul says here in order to make room for the more or less peaceful (Schrage: "schiedlich-friedlich") coexistence of Christian and non-Christian wisdom. Repeatedly, especially beginning with the Enlightenment, attempts have been made to accommodate the exercise of human reason as in some sense autonomous.³⁵

³³ That is, criticism of its subject matter (*Sache*)—in the sense of the right/mandate to decide, if deemed warranted, that the Bible is wrong, in error. Stuhlmacher's very helpful article (see above, n. 13) is marred in this respect. He begins his brief conclusion (342f.) with the emphatic assertion, "Theological *Sachkritik* must remain silent with regard to this passage [1 Cor 2:6-16]." What he goes on to say, however, about a circumscribed role for "the historical critical method" as "a special human talent that may be put to the service of faith," is confusing at best. Everything here depends on how "critical" is understood. If in view is "scholarly seriousness and gifts [applied] to the clarification of the linguistic form of Paul's letters and the biblical books in general," who would object? But he continues: it is "both dangerous and wrong to abandon critical thought and judgment in interpreting Scripture and deciding matters of faith in general" (with a parenthetical reference to 1 Pet 3:15), which means that "[t]heological thinking must proceed from the gospel. As such it must be—and continue to be—critical in the light of its subject matter." Now, it appears, *Sachkritik* of Scripture may in fact be necessary at points (just for the sake of the gospel!). Such *Sachkritik*, however, standing in judgment on Scripture, can only be a function of rational autonomy, and, if our passage teaches us anything, human autonomy (wisdom κατὰ σάφκα) resists all attenuation; by its very nature it seeks to control everything (and certainly cannot be enlisted in the service of faith, at least not faith in the Christ of Scripture as God's inspired word). So far as "Paul's letters and the biblical books in general" are concerned (in their original text form as well as content, cf. 2:13), *Sachkritik* admitted at one point means, in principle, that it cannot be excluded at any point. At any rate (though Stuhlmacher would likely disagree), such *Sachkritik* is not what the Reformers had in mind when they vigorously affirmed the external clarity of Scripture (to which he appeals, cf. pp. 328f.).

³⁴ Schrage (*Korinther*, 269f.) provides a brief survey; the entire section, "Auslegungs- und Wirkungsgeschichte" (pp. 269-78), repays careful reading and reflection.

³⁵ There is no reason to suppose that the rise of postmodernism will diminish occasions for such accommodations. So far as I can see, while postmodern epistemology may have abandoned the Enlightenment pretense to the neutrality of reason, it is, if anything, even more resolutely committed to human autonomy—rational or otherwise.

All such efforts, however, run aground on the immovable rock of Paul's unqualified πάντα. Every attempt to read our passage in partial terms or to restrict its scope by categorical distinctions, of whatever kind, clashes with the sweeping totality of Paul's vision. The antithesis in view leaves no room for an amicable division of territory or a neutral terrain. The wisdom of God is eschatological; it opposes *all* the wisdom of this age, *all* human wisdom κατὰ σάρκα.³⁶

Especially popular but damaging has been the notion that the passage is limited to the "religious" sphere, as if Paul's concern is "spiritual" truth in distinction from other kinds ("secular"), which are beyond his purview. The pernicious consequences of this view are nowhere more palpable than in its highly influential Kantian version.³⁷ The noumenal-phenomenal disjunction supposedly functions to circumscribe (pure) reason and limit its autonomous exercise, thus making room for faith and its free exercise. But the effect, as Western culture of the past 200 years makes all too evident, has been exactly the opposite. Increasingly, faith, especially faith in Christ and the Scriptures, has been marginalized and banished into irrelevance. The lesson is plain: give "secular" (= autonomous) reason an inch and it will not rest content until it controls everything (which, by the way, simply demonstrates the truth of our passage). Or, as Paul might warn the church, "all things are yours . . . or nothing is yours."

2. *The Unbeliever's Knowledge*

Still, the nettlesome question of the knowledge of the unbeliever remains, a particularly controversial one between Van Til and his critics (although it strikes me that this has always been much more of an issue for the latter). Van Til is charged with being unclear: most often he roundly denies that unbelievers have any true knowledge, but then sometimes he suggests that they do know.³⁸

³⁶ In an otherwise fine and penetrating treatment of our passage, D. A. Carson is at best misleading in saying, "But Paul is not addressing general questions of epistemology. He is not even addressing how one comes to a knowledge of what some specific passage of Scripture really means" (*The Cross and Christian Ministry* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993] 64). Certainly, as Carson immediately adds, "His focus is the fundamental message of the crucified Messiah." But present as well are profound and essential considerations for any sound epistemology—considerations, for instance, that exclude, as Carson himself does, an "ostensibly neutral epistemology" (p. 65).

³⁷ As a measure of how convoluted and even inverted the history of interpretation can become, J. H. Jung-Stilling, a contemporary of Kant, believed Kant's philosophy to be a confirmation of Paul; the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he held, is a virtual commentary on 1 Cor 2:14 (cited in Schrage, *Korinther*, 271 n. 288)!

³⁸ See, e.g., Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 24–28; *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* ([Philadelphia:] Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 43ff.; cf. J. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) 49–61.

Without being able here to enter into this debate in any full way nor wanting to suggest either that Van Til has had the last word and could not have expressed himself better, I do propose that what he says about the unbeliever's knowledge, far from betraying a vitiating flaw in his thinking, points up a singular and important strength. Van Til, following Paul and the Reformers, does not deny the (resourceful and valuable) know-how unbelievers can display (building highways, brushing their teeth, writing textbooks on logic, etc., often better than believers). But, following Scripture with Calvin, and even more consistently than the latter, Van Til captures the ambiguity of the Bible's, especially Paul's, assessment of the unbeliever's knowledge.

The "problem" begins with Scripture itself. In describing how and what the unbeliever knows, it does so in a deliberately ambiguous, paradoxical, "dialectical" fashion, precisely and necessarily in order to make a crucial point unambiguously and powerfully plain. According to Rom 1:18ff.—a passage Van Til is sometimes charged with downplaying or treating one-sidedly—unbelievers both know and are ignorant; they understand and do not understand, and they do so in the same *cognitive* moment. The knowledge of God (of "his eternal power and divine nature," v. 20, that is, who he is as the true and living God), is (a) clearly revealed in and around them, (b) made evident to them, and (c) understood by them (vv. 19-20). But this truth is suppressed (or repressed, v. 18) such that their *thinking* is futile and their *uncomprehending* hearts darkened (v. 21). As presumably wise (cf. "wise and understanding," Luke 10:21; "wise κατὰ σάρκα," 1 Cor 1:26) they are in fact foolish (the point made in 1 Cor 1:20ff.).³⁹ What they believe is God's truth exchanged for a lie (v. 25), and their *minds* are corrupted, worthless (ἄδόκιμος, v. 28).⁴⁰

The categories in vv. 21ff., no less than in vv. 18-20, are cognitive or contain a cognitive element. It is gratuitous to maintain that vv. 18-20 describe an (adequate) intellectual knowledge while in vv. 21ff. the knowledge in view is defective only in a more than intellectual respect (that is, it is not intimate or saving knowledge).⁴¹ Where is the exegetical basis for this disjunction between cognitive and more than cognitive knowledge? The knowledge of v. 21 is disqualified from a cognitive (as well as more than cognitive) angle; the intellectual aspect may not be suppressed (no pun on v. 18 intended!). That knowledge is a matter of "thoughts," "reasonings"

³⁹ Rom 1:22 and 1 Cor 1:20 are the only two uses of μωραίνω in Paul.

⁴⁰ It is important to keep in mind that, while every human being without exception is in its purview, this passage does not describe the actual experience of every unbeliever, particularly at the level of conscious psychology. Paul paints in bold, sweeping strokes, capturing the collective human condition as a result of the fall, the universality of solidarity in sin and its consequences.

⁴¹ As do the authors (R. C. Sproul, J. Gerstner, A. Lindsley) of *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); there are more exegetical options to consider than they pose (p. 49f.).

(διαλογισμοῖς) that are “futile,” “worthless.” The heart is “foolish,” that is, literally “without understanding” (ἄσύνετος), lacking comprehension.

The full impact of “their foolish heart was darkened” (v. 21) must not be missed. “Heart” brings the individual into view as a totality, considered from the center, the self as a whole, with all its capacities, purposefully directed, especially as a religious being (to or away from God).⁴² “Heart” captures the self in its integrity or, we may say, unbelievers in their “broken wholeness.” The heart, Paul says, is “without understanding”—not just one aspect of the unbeliever but every function; and the attendant circumstance is darkness—total darkness, cognitive and otherwise.

For Paul, it is not a matter of the primacy of the intellect but of the heart. His point here is hardly that the basic problem is one of (refusing) acknowledgement but not of understanding, of the will rather than the intellect, moral instead of philosophical. Distinctions like intellect, will, and emotions have their place, but they are always and ultimately functions of the heart, directed either toward or against God. “The heart *only* has its reasons” (to modify Pascal); all reasoning is reasoning from the heart.

Elsewhere, in Eph 4:17–18,⁴³ Paul is equally, if not more, forceful; cognitive language is emphatic. The sinful rebellion and moral insensitivity of unbelievers involves “the futility of their mind” (νοῦς) and their “darkened understanding” (διάνοια; the echoes of Rom 1:21 are multiple). This (at the very least, in part) expressly cognitive inability results from their deeply-rooted “ignorance” (ἄγνοια), rooted in “the hardness of their heart.”

All told, what Paul ascribes to unbelievers is “knowledgeable ignorance,” “uncomprehending understanding.” The unbeliever both knows and does not know, and there are no categories for neatly distinguishing the one from the other. This “dialectical” dilemma of the unbeliever is the genius of Paul’s teaching.

However capable of being better formulated, this analysis—to anticipate the objection—is not to be dismissed as self-contradictory nonsense. Unbelievers do know—they know God—and, within the parameters of unbelief, there are *no* categories or distinctions in terms of which that is *not* true; they know completely, that is, they know from the heart. But this knowledge in its actual possession is always confused, inevitably unstable. To use Paul’s language, it is in every respect “futile”; it can serve no useful, constructive epistemological purpose—either in understanding God or, in that light (or better, that darkness), ourselves and the rest of the creation. Specifically—and surely Paul would spare the church and have it never forget—such knowledge is not sound and adequate as a point of contact for bringing unbelievers a step closer to accepting the truth of the gospel.

⁴² On Paul’s use of “heart” (καρδία), see Ridderbos, *Paul*, 119f.

⁴³ Not even cited in *Classical Apologetics*, even in a context where we might most expect it (p. 49).

Perhaps a helpful parallel to the unbeliever's knowledge is what we find in discussing the effects of the fall on the image of God. Is the unbeliever still the *imago*? Yes and no. Established distinctions for addressing the difference (e.g., broader and narrower senses, natural and moral, structural and functional) all leave something to be desired. The unbeliever is/has the image of God, and *that* truth—image-bearing but sin-blinded need, deeply rooted and ineradicable in unbelievers—provides the point of contact, the capacity for being addressed by the gospel and, through the faith-creating, resurrection power of the Holy Spirit, for recognizing and accepting its truth, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). But, apart from that working of the Spirit, being the image in no way alleviates or extenuates human sinfulness; being the image is the presupposition for being a sinner. The unbeliever remains the image of God, entirely, but only "in a negative mode."⁴⁴ Every single capacity enjoyed as an image-bearer is engaged in rebellion against God.

In this respect, common grace, with its restraining effects, is not to be overlooked or minimized, and certainly deserves more attention than I give it here.⁴⁵ Contrary to a frequent misconception, however, the maintenance of the divine image is not simply an unmitigated benefit of common grace; the image (however exactly it is to be defined) makes human sin, *human* sin.⁴⁶ Common grace does moderate the consequences of the antithesis between belief and unbelief, but not the antithesis itself—a crucial distinction; common grace and the antithesis do not function in inverse proportion to each other. Common grace may make unbelievers (genuinely) "nicer" but does not reduce their enmity toward God one whit (Rom 8:7). Common grace renders our present life in the world tolerable, even enjoyable, but does not bring unbelievers even one step closer to the new creation. Common grace—unlike special, gospel grace—is of "this age"; it is not eschatological.

After all the many words on this issue, Calvin's word-picture is difficult to improve on:⁴⁷ Unbelievers are like travelers on a pitch-black, moonless night, after a momentary lightning flash. For an instant the terrain around them has been illumined far and wide, but before they can take even one step, they are plunged back into darkness and left groping about aimlessly.

⁴⁴ Van Genderen and Velema, *Dogmatiek*, 308, 332; the entire treatment of the image of God in chap. 8 (pp. 292-352) is most penetrating. (The early appearance of an English translation of this book is greatly to be desired.)

⁴⁵ See esp. the various writings of Van Til published together in *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).

⁴⁶ "The higher is our conception of man in his intrinsic essence, the greater must be the gravity of his offense in rebellion and enmity against God. . . . Man conceived of as in the image of God, so far from toning down the doctrine of total depravity, points rather to its gravity, intensity, and irreversibility." "It may seem paradoxical, but the higher our view of man's nature, the more aggravated becomes the depravity that characterizes man as fallen" (J. Murray, *Collected Writings* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977] 2.38-39, 45-46).

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.277 [2.2.18].

That is the situation of unbelievers, to vary the figure slightly: frozen perpetually in the split second after the firing of a flash attachment in a dark-room—with a blurred and fading, still indelible impression of everything just illumined and yet now no longer seeing anything—knowing and yet not knowing. This too, I take it, is the basic, controlling point that Van Til, in his day, was concerned to make about the knowledge of the unbeliever.

3. *Paul and Natural Theology*

The unbelievers in view in Rom 1:18ff. are those in view in 1 Cor 1:18ff.; though considered from different perspectives, they are not two distinct groups. Paul's scope in both passages is universal; the general considerations of each apply, collectively, to all unbelievers; the two passages supplement and reinforce each other. Paul would not have us be in any doubt: those under the impact of God's general revelation (Rom 1:19-20)—in all of its necessity, authority, sufficiency, and clarity⁴⁸—are those who, just as an expression of their rebellious struggle against the unrelenting, inescapable pressure of that revelation, "require signs . . . and . . . seek wisdom" (1 Cor 1:22). All such efforts are κατὰ σάρκα; the apostle goes on to disqualify and oppose them for what they are: the inevitable truth-suppression (cf. Rom 1:18) of "this age," attempts that will never be able to conclude that the gospel of Christ—and any epistemological considerations truly conducive to the truth of the gospel—are anything but a "stumbling block," (provable, verifiable) "foolishness" (v. 23).

Among the dissenting critiques of Van Til's epistemology and apologetics, one of the more recent, and most massive, is *Classical Apologetics*.⁴⁹ At the heart of its proposal for "A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith" is an extensive defense of natural theology, based primarily, so far as Scripture is involved, on an appeal to Rom 1:18ff.

Remarkably, the authors virtually ignore 1 Cor 2:6-16.⁵⁰ In chap. 9 ("The Spirit, the Word, and the Church"), there is a passing reference to v. 9 (as well as similar references to the Matthew 11/Luke 10 passage, pp. 162f., 167); on pp. 170-72, vv. 9-13 are quoted and discussed briefly for their bearing on the doctrine of Scripture.⁵¹ Elsewhere, where we might most expect it (or the Gospels pericope) to be treated,⁵² there is nothing, not even a parenthetical reference. Most remarkably, v. 14 (the inability of the

⁴⁸ See Van Til's masterful treatment of general revelation, "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946) 255-93, esp. 261-75.

⁴⁹ Full bibliographic details are above, n. 41.

⁵⁰ Unless I have missed it and need to be corrected (the book has no Scripture index).

⁵¹ "This passage may well be the best in all of Scripture for putting together the revelation of God, the inspiration of God, and the illumination of God" (*Classical Apologetics*, 171). This, while certainly true, narrows the scope of the passage; see above, n. 26.

⁵² Chap. 4, "The Biblical Evidence Confirming Natural Theology" (where Rom 1:18ff. is discussed in some detail); chap. 13, "The Noetic Influence of Sin"; chap. 16, "The Self-Attesting God"; chap. 17, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit."

unbeliever to understand) and the antithesis in vv. 14-15 are not even mentioned, much less addressed.⁵³

It may be a fair criticism of this article that more attention could have been given to Rom 1:18ff. But it will hardly do, in trying to make a case for natural theology, simply to bypass 1 Cor 2:6-16. Apparently the authors of *Classical Apologetics* consider the passage irrelevant. Then they at least need to show us how that is so: for example, how the epistemological gulf between belief and unbelief is really something less than eschatological, or how the cognitive inability of unbelievers in v. 14 does not exclude the rational competence to arrive at a sound natural theology, or how the "all things" of v. 15 must be circumscribed and does not include the truths of such a theology. That demand does not seem "unreasonable."

In fact, however, 1 Cor 2:6-16 (1:18-3:23) is the death blow to all natural theology.⁵⁴ There is no knowledge of God resident in unbelievers or accessible to them that reduces the eschatological void that separates them from a saving knowledge of God. It is sad not to have recognized that, especially in the light of developments in theology and the church since the Reformation.

The prevailing reading of that history today—namely, that seventeenth-century Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy is an abandonment of the Reformation that prepares the way for the Enlightenment and then Liberalism (until all has been made better by Karl Barth *cum suis*)—is a gross distortion.⁵⁵ It does, however, contain a significant germ of truth. The increasing preoccupation of orthodox dogmatics with natural theology, particularly after Descartes, worked to undermine that orthodoxy and aided the rise of the very rationalism it was opposing. The tension is there, for instance, in Francis Turretin on the role of reason in theology.⁵⁶ And the outcome—a

⁵³ This omission is all the more perplexing in authors who are committed Reformed theologians, men whom we otherwise rightly honor for their outstanding contributions in effectively communicating important truths of the Reformed tradition in our time.

⁵⁴ "... above all every natural theology, wherever it sees the divine *remoto spiritu Christi* [apart from the Spirit of Christ] resident in man or the world, has difficulty in coping with 1 Cor 2" (Schrage, *Korinther*, 272f.).

⁵⁵ See esp. the important work of Richard Muller in rehabilitating the Reformed "scholastics" and redressing the distortions of this currently widespread paradigm by showing the deep and cordial continuity, despite all the differences in method, between the theology of the Reformers and the seventeenth century. See esp. his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 1, Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), including the primary sources and secondary literature cited throughout.

⁵⁶ E.g., in topic 1, question 8 of his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (trans. G. M. Giger; ed. J. T. Dennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992) 1.23-28. This discussion, in continuity with the Reformers, is for the most part a helpful treatment of the ministerial role of reason in theology ("an instrument of faith," section 7, p. 25). Toward the end, however, he speaks of the use of arguments, both theological (based on Scripture) and philosophical, in the effort to see atheists "converted" (*converti*), "so that by the principles of reason the prejudices against the Christian religion drawn from corrupt reason may be removed" (section 23, p. 28); cf. his not always clear comments on natural theology in question 3, pp. 6-9 ("natural theology" seems at points to be equivalent to general revelation).

permanent lesson that we miss to our theological peril—is the startling swiftness with which in the span of a single generation at the Academy in Geneva, from Turretin father to son, Reformed orthodoxy was virtually displaced and rendered impotent in the face of a frank rationalism, bordering on Socinianism, that was quick to follow.⁵⁷ By now, too, we should have learned: natural theology may have a place in Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies—with their semi-Pelagian anthropologies and qualified optimism about the unbeliever's capacity to know God—but not in a theology that would be Reformed.⁵⁸

The knowledge of God that unbelievers have does not serve to silence their rebellion or otherwise dispose them to accept the truth of the gospel. That, too, is the *σκάνδαλον* of the cross (1 Cor 1:23). And that, as much as any, is the scandalizing truth that Van Til, following Paul, labored to hold before the church, perhaps with unprecedented tenacity and rigor in the history of theology. May those efforts not be lost or go unheeded. May that truth not prove to be a stumbling block to us and generations of the church yet to come.⁵⁹

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⁵⁷ See the informative account of M. I. Klauber, "Jean-Alphonse Turretini and the Abrogation of the Formula Consensus in Geneva," *WTJ* 53 (1991) 325–38, and, more extensively, his *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), esp. 143–92.

⁵⁸ See in this respect the perceptive discussion of van Genderen and Velema, *Dogmatiek*, 126–33; cf. Schrage, *Korinther*, 273 n. 302 on Vatican I's grounding of a *duplex ordo cognitionis* on Rom 1:20, on the one hand, 1 Cor 2:7–8, 10, on the other. All such "two-order" knowledge constructions can only be maintained at the expense or compromise of what these passages actually teach.

⁵⁹ Despite the overall impression this article may leave, I have no desire to escalate but would like to see reduced and clarified as much as possible the conflict in apologetics between "evidentialists" and "presuppositionalists" (this designating nomenclature itself is already a source of some confusion). Yes, there may be a certain amount of talking by each other and mutual misunderstanding, especially where the debate takes place on a common Reformed commitment (no, Van Til has not spoken the final word). But I am convinced that genuine rapprochement can take place only where there is a common appreciation of those biblical considerations drawn from Reformed anthropology and soteriology that control Van Til's epistemology and apologetics—considerations, as I see it, that are much less clearly present, even eclipsed, in the "classical" approach.

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