

OF ROCKS AND TREES
CHRIST AND THE SALVATION OF HUMAN
KNOWLEDGE

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In partial payment of personal debts:
Greg L. Bahnsen (1948-1995)
Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (1936-)

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

— C.S. LEWIS

Sleepless light is now over all, and the west has yielded to the east. For ‘the Sun of Righteousness,’ who drives His chariot over all pervades equally all humanity, like ‘His Father, who makes His sun to rise on all men,’ and distils on them the dew of the truth. He hath changed sunset into sunrise, and through the cross brought death to life; and having wrenched man from destruction, He hath raised him to the skies, transplanting mortality into immortality, and translating earth to heaven.

— CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Thirty years ago Professor Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., published a journal article on 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.¹ Its modest title, “Some Epistemological Reflections,” undersold the importance and gravity of his thesis, which possibly explains how and why the essay garnered little to no attention for the following three decades. An editor nowadays would insist on modern promotional techniques. To get people to read, one must employ “click bait.” An all-caps headline reading THE APOSTLE PAUL: VAN TILIAN PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGIST would have sparked more than enough controversy and interest. As it happens, the article went virtually unnoticed, or at least unanswered. In the intervening years none of the myriad critics of Cornelius Van Til and his unique methodology for Christian apologetics appeared to have noticed it.

In December of 2024 the present author mentioned this lacuna in an online newsletter, challenging Van Til’s detractors to engage Gaffin’s exegesis and argument.² Two writers accepted the challenge. Joel Carini, a Westminster Theological Seminary alumnus and Ph.D candidate in philosophy at Saint Louis University, quickly responded in an essay entitled, “The Natural Man Does Not Accept the Things of the Spirit of God—But He Can Accept Natural Theology.”³ Keith Mathison, professor of systematic

1. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6-16,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 103-124.

2. Brian G. Mattson, “An Apologetic Thermopylae,” *The Square Inch Newsletter*, No.241, December 20, 2024. (<https://brianmattson.substack.com/p/an-apologetic-thermopylae>)

3. Joel Carini, “The Natural Man Does Not Accept the Things of the Spirit of God—But He Can Accept Natural Theology,” *The Natural Theologian*, December 23, 2024. (<https://joelcarini.substack.com/p/the-natural-man-does-not-accept-the>)

theology at Reformation Bible College, followed with a very lengthy essay of his own.⁴

THE INTRODUCTION OF A NOVELTY

The two essays share the identical criticism of both Van Til and Gaffin. The problem, as Carini tells it, is that they assume “a controversial philosophical doctrine: The British idealist doctrine of holism.” He explains:

Holism was a central doctrine of the British Idealist philosophers. Cornelius Van Til’s philosophy Ph.D. at Princeton University was on the Idealists (“God and the Absolute”). Gaffin then imbibed this doctrine as a student of Van Til’s.

And Mathison:

The key element of Van Til’s epistemology is the idea that true knowledge is exhaustive knowledge. In certain branches of philosophy, this is known as ‘epistemological holism.’ A version of this was taught by the British idealists that Van Til devoted much of his life to studying. As Van Til explains it, true knowledge is knowledge of any

4. Keith A. Mathison, “Does 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 Support Cornelius Van Til’s System of Thought? An Examination of Richard Gaffins 1995 Journal Article,” March 24, 2024. (<https://www.keithmathison.org/post/does-1-corinthians-2-6-16-support-cornelius-van-til-s-system-of-thought-an-examination-of-richard-g>). Since both Mathison and Carini published their essays in an online format without pagination, citation is challenging. Repeatedly footnoting links to a web address seems unnecessary; readers may assume, unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from these respective sources.

fact in its relation to God and in its relation to every other fact.

It is unclear whether these two critics arrived at the exact same novelty independently of each other. Novel, because “epistemological holism” is not a term ordinarily (if ever) used in the voluminous literature concerning Van Til and presuppositional apologetics; neither Van Til nor Gaffin ever used the term. But it is novel in a still more important sense: it is not a standard classification in the discipline of philosophy. There are, in fact, no “branches of philosophy” in which there is a thing established as “epistemological holism.”⁵

“Holism” (as opposed to “atomism”) in philosophy primarily addresses metaphysical questions (or physical ones in the natural sciences). It has implications for epistemology, as all metaphysics do, but its concerns are primarily about the nature of reality (or, in the case of the philosophy of language, things like the nature of “meaning” or “reference”). It is not about the acquisition or justification of knowledge (epistemology) *per se*. For example, a “holist” metaphysics may lead one, as a corollary or implication, to something like the “coherence theory of truth” or “meaning holism” (and those are primarily metaphysical or philosophy of language discussions) or Quine’s “web of belief,”

5. There is, for example, no entry for “epistemological holism” or any variant thereof in the gold-standard *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The term “epistemological holism” appears just four times in the entire encyclopedia: one use each in such varied entries as “Speusippus,” “Herman Lotze,” “Holism and Nonseparability in Physics,” and “Content Externalism and Skepticism.” Moreover, the *very* few published papers on “epistemological holism” are in the tradition of analytic philosophy and the philosophy of language, having little to do with Idealism. It is hardly an established or mainstream “school of thought.”

all of which, to greater or lesser extent, view knowledge and meaning as involving systems of interconnected and mutually influencing and reinforcing parts.

The “holist” point of view, located in its basic metaphysical domain, is that reality is a unified and coherent “whole” rather than an irrational and potentially incoherent collection of conflicting or disjointed parts. Its pedigree is easily traceable as far back as Parmenides in the 5th century B.C., and it is certainly true that British idealists held to a holistic view of reality. So, for that matter, does every single Christian theologian or philosopher who has ever lived, including the ones under discussion at this very moment, along with every Sunday school child who has ever affirmatively recited Genesis 1:1. The similarity between the former group of people and the latter starts and ends with the shared semantic use of the word “whole.”

Idealism’s “whole”—its comprehensive, metaphysical unity—is conceived as inclusive of both God and creation, infinite and finite, being and becoming (i.e., monism), while the Christian’s “whole” maintains God’s aseity (i.e., transcendence) and the absolute distinction between Creator and creature. The Christian “whole” is comprised of *created* reality, “the heavens and the earth.” Reality is at bottom “two,” not “one”—Creator and creature.

Because Idealism’s “whole” collapses this Creator-creature distinction, it must insist that divine and human knowledge be univocal, of the same type or kind, as well as be equally comprehensive in scope. This was G.W.F. Hegel’s faith in a great and inevitable eschatological advent: Absolute Mind (or *Geist* or Spirit) would finally emerge fully self-conscious from its dialectical journey through history, at which point all knowledge is *Godlike* knowledge, exhaustive and without remainder—the Serpent’s promise to Eve

come to fruition.⁶ Hegel's foundational maxim that "the real is the rational and the rational is the real" explicitly asserts the exhaustive co-extension of metaphysics and epistemology, of being and of knowing. This conflation of the infinite and finite Herman Bavinck called the *πρωτον ψευδος* ("first lie") of Hegel's philosophy.⁷ Indeed, it is literally the first lie: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Idealism has no place for analogical reasoning, whereupon creaturely knowledge is non-autonomous, finite, dependent, derivative, and receptive—"thinking God's thoughts after him."

One may further observe with little exaggeration that no one in the entire history of theology and philosophy has emphasized these very points as often, as clearly, as expansively, and as relentlessly as Cornelius Van Til. Somehow this does not deter in the slightest Joel Carini or Keith Mathison from claiming that Van Til actually borrowed Idealism's epistemology. They do so on no discernible (let alone argued) grounds other than that Van Til had a life-long interest in the topic and that it was the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Neither writer mentions to his readers what Van Til himself concluded from his intense study of British Idealism:

Waiving now the question, who is in the right, we call attention to the impassable gulf between these two types of epistemology [Idealism and Theism]. No harmony

6. Never mind, as critics have long pointed out, that this *particular* person, "Eve," has been utterly annihilated in the process.

7. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, eds. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2018): 18.

between the two is possible. One must choose between them. This will appear more definitely as we advance.

The difference in metaphysics corresponds to the difference in epistemology. From the idealistic assumption that all thought is of one type it follows that the Universe is a wider concept than 'God.' It is the Universe in the case of Bradley as in the case of other Idealists, that is really the Absolute. 'God' and man operate within this Universe. They are aspects of this Universe, correlatives one of the other. They are really *equally ultimate* aspects, or they could not be aspects of one Reality at all.⁸

This is a passage chosen at random among dozens like it from *Christianity & Idealism*, an entire book of collected essays written by Van Til filled with critiques of F.H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, A.S. Pringle-Pattison, and other British Idealists.⁹ One would think in the expanse of his 14,000 words Keith Mathison might find some space—a footnote, even—to at least mention the fact that the person he is now accusing of embracing “modernist” doctrines of Idealism spent the better part of the twentieth century subjecting those very doctrines to penetrating critical scrutiny. If he has reason to suspect Van Til to be disingenuous in his disavowals, he does not share it.¹⁰

8. Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity & Idealism* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1955): 16.

9. One may find numerous other such passages in the book Mathison liberally quotes, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*.

10. A curse to the third and fourth generations, it seems, is that which caused a somewhat exasperated footnote in Van Til's *The Defense of the Faith*: “I do not understand why my critics object when I use such terms as ‘concrete universal’ or employ such terms as ‘the universal,’ ‘the particular,’ ‘the one and many.’ Especially I do not understand this on the part of those

Instead, he introduces confusion from the very outset of his essay. In his own summary of Van Til's thought, which he borrowed from his recent book, he remarks that for Van Til

[h]uman knowledge, however, does not have to be exhaustive because God's knowledge is exhaustive. Human knowledge is required only to be analogical to God's knowledge. This means that it is to be a finite reflection of God's infinite and exhaustive knowledge. Even though human knowledge is not exhaustive knowledge, it is true knowledge as far as it goes if it corresponds to God's exhaustive knowledge of himself and all things.

Clearly, according to this summary, human knowledge for Van Til need not—indeed, cannot—be exhaustive to be true. Then, four paragraphs later, Mathison writes that “[t]he key element in Van Til's epistemology is the idea that true knowledge is exhaustive knowledge” and that “*As Van Til explains it*, true knowledge is knowledge of any fact in

who are ‘experts in philosophy’ and whose business it is to teach philosophy from the Christian point of view. The charge of ‘intellectual anabaptism’ might well be lodged against me if, as a teacher of Christian apologetics, I failed to translate Christian truth in the language of the day. Is not the important thing that Christian meanings be contrasted with non-Christian meanings? The Apostles did not shun the usage of language borrowed from non-Christian sources. When they used the term *logos* must they be thought of as followers of Philo's non-Christian thought simply because he also used that term?” In *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Van Til freely and readily acknowledges in the first chapter the formal similarities and shared nomenclature of his thought with British idealists. He then clearly and forcefully explains the differences. The fact that Mathison is aware of this—as will become clear—suggests a disingenuousness of his own.

its relation to God and in its relation to *every other fact*.”¹¹ That sounds very much like the notion that exhaustive knowledge is requisite for any true knowledge, *even for humans*. Mathison quotes a passage from Van Til that he presumably thinks substantiates this claim:

For the Christian system, knowledge consists in understanding the relation of any fact to God as revealed in Scripture. I know a fact truly to the extent that I understand the *exact* relation such a fact sustains to the plan of God.

But this does not say (even with Mathison’s adding of italics) that one must know a given fact’s relation to “every other fact.” Van Til says one must know a given fact’s relation “to the plan of God.” Continuing on in the passage from *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Van Til adds:

It is the plan of God that gives any fact meaning in terms of the plan of God. The whole meaning of any fact is exhausted by its position in and relation to the plan of God. This implies that every fact is related to every other fact. God’s plan is a unit. And it is this unity of the plan of God, founded as it is in the very being of God, that gives the unity that we look for between all the finite facts.¹²

Does Mathison disagree with this? Are there stray “facts” outside the eternal counsel of God and his providen-

11. Emphasis added.

12. Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1969): 6.

tial ordering? Was Epicurus right in supposing that certain phenomena like change, freedom, and novelty can be explained by a random, irrational atomic “swerve” (or “glitch in the matrix”), the kind that might catch even God by surprise? One assumes that Mathison, with Van Til, affirms the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his will, freely and immutably foreordain whatsoever comes to pass.”

Mathison has, at very most, thus far established that Cornelius Van Til fervently believed in both the omniscience and sovereignty of God, and that, being creatures, human beings are epistemically dependent on God’s knowledge and plan. Put mildly, it would be strange for a Reformed systematic theology professor to find these convictions problematic; it is nothing other than the age-old Reformed scholastic “archetypal/ectypal” scheme.¹³ Mathison then moves on with no further elaboration on the subject, leaving the impression that Van Til believed that for a human being to know any fact, he or she must know its exhaustive relations both to God and to *every other fact*. This is the sole “evidence” of Van Til’s alleged embrace of Idealism or “epistemological holism”—if one does not know all facts, one does not know any facts.

To the contrary:

The system of truth set forth in Scripture cannot be fully understood by the creature. The point here is not merely that creatures who are sinners are unwilling to believe

13. C.f., Willem Van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64:2 (Fall 2002): 319-336.

the truth. The point is further that man as finite cannot understand God his Maker in an exhaustive manner. As he cannot understand God exhaustively, *so he cannot understand anything related to God in an exhaustive way*, for to understand it we would have to penetrate its relation to God and to penetrate that relation we would have to understand God exhaustively.¹⁴

Joel Carini's account of Van Til's alleged "epistemological holism" is likewise misleading. He favorably quotes the authors of *Classical Apologetics* and their well-known caricature of Van Til: "To know the flower on the wall, you have to know the world and all." He explains that epistemological holism is "the doctrine that the content of truths or facts are not separable but a unified, systematic whole" and that, moreover, those that maintain this view (including Van Til and Gaffin)

hold that if thinkers have a difference at one point, then they effectively differ at all points. There are no individual truths, only holistic worldviews. Likewise, you cannot accurately perceive some of the world, some of the truth, but misunderstand other parts. The failure to understand the whole undermines apparent success in analyzing the parts.¹⁵

14. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, K. Scott Oliphint, ed. (Glenside: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023): 27, emphasis added. Again, dozens, if not hundreds, of similar passages could have been chosen to illustrate the point.

15. Readers are encouraged to compare this alleged description of Van Til's view with his discussion of the "Coherence Theory of Truth" in *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 2-3.

Carini claims to hold, by way of contrast, to “epistemological atomism, the idea that there are multiple truths. People can differ on particular points without this meaning that they disagree entirely.”¹⁶ Whether this means he believes there are multiple *contradictory* “truths” is unclear, though one should think such relativism from a Christian thinker unlikely.

For now it suffices to observe that Carini does not really hold to what he calls “epistemological atomism.” Near the end of his essay he writes: “[O]n philosophical grounds, I would argue that holism is false. While the world is a unity and one part affects another, our knowledge of the world is separable and incomplete.” But if our knowledge of the world is separable and incomplete in the fashion he seems to intend, on what *philosophical grounds* does he so casually and confidently assert that “the world is a unity and one part affects another”? How would he know? He has no perspective from which to make this universal claim. He can only know this if he abandons his epistemological “atomism.” So he does what he must: he *presupposes* it, most likely (and laudably, with three cheers from Van Til) because of his Christian convictions derived from the special revelation from God found in places like Genesis 1:1. Absent that, there is little, philosophically speaking, to keep him from the sort of genuine *metaphysical* atomism, relativism, and, eventually, Deism (or atheism) that Epicurus fashioned by way of his unaided reason.

Carini’s real concern in his essay appears to be that of affirming the finite, partial, provisional, “through a glass

16. In philosophy, the word for there being multiple truths is “pluralism.” “Atomism” means that truths are *indivisible*, which is the opposite of what he is trying to argue.

darkly” character of human knowledge, and to maintain that reasonable people can have different perspectives on the same truth without necessarily being in contradiction. It is surprising that he thinks this is somehow contrary to a Van Tilian epistemology when one of Van Til’s most celebrated students and capable defenders, John Frame, made it his career to explore the “multi-perspectival” character of human knowledge, and never for a moment thought himself denying Van Til’s basic account of epistemology.¹⁷ In fact, he even wrote:

In my opinion, [Van Til’s] account of the metaphysics of knowledge merits superlative commendation. It is profoundly biblical and intellectually penetrating, and it provides substantial clarification of the fundamental nature of human thought. I am critical of Van Til in other areas, but in this one I am almost as close to him as the most slavish movement-Van Tilian.¹⁸

In Mathison’s use of the term, “epistemological holism”—which, it is alleged, is a very bad thing that Gaffin imports into his exegesis of Jesus and Paul—appears to be the belief in God’s omniscience (his exhaustive knowledge) and sovereignty (his exhaustive plan), along with the human noetic dependence that that inevitably entails (human knowledge must be a finite reflection of God’s infinite knowledge). He

17. C.f., John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987)

18. John M. Frame, *Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995) : 53. Frame’s use of the term “VanTillian” has been altered to the linguistically correct, “VanTilian.” One hopes that further scholarship will adopt this practice and bring proper conformity to a long-standing confusion. “Van Till” is a different Dutch surname than “Van Til.”

brings forth no other obvious features of this objectionable “holism” in his essay.¹⁹ It may thus prove a useful and illuminating exercise to replace throughout his essay Mathison’s use of the term “epistemological holism” with what that term means so far as he has actually defined it. Here are just two results, with the substitution italicized:

The only way to find the modernist idea of *God’s omniscience, sovereignty, and human noetic dependence* in Scripture is to put it there. It can be found only if we are engaged in eisegesis rather than exegesis.

Neither Jesus nor Paul (nor John Calvin) teach the false modernist theory of *God’s omniscience, sovereignty, and human noetic dependence*. None of them teach the idea that special revelation and regeneration are required in order for any human knowledge to exist. Artificially forcing *God’s omniscience, sovereignty, and human noetic dependence* into the teachings of Jesus and Paul causes us to miss the actual important and amazing points they are making about the Gospel. *God’s omniscience, sovereignty, and human noetic dependence* [are] an unbiblical epistemology and thus should not be used by Christians as a lens through which we interpret the Word of God.

The reader can readily see that these critiques do not work. God’s omniscience, sovereignty, and human noetic

19. Mathison considers it a related, but separate idea or question whether human beings are dependent upon *special* revelation for true knowledge of any fact. E.g., “As we will see, when Gaffin speaks of providing ‘some of the exegetical support for several key emphases in Van Til’s epistemology,’ he is referring especially to two ideas: (1) epistemological holism and (2) the necessity of special revelation for understanding any fact whatsoever.”

dependence cannot be the concepts behind the euphemistic camouflage. A straightforward glance at the passages in Matthew 11, Luke 10, 1 Corinthians 2, and Romans 1 reveals that God's omniscience, sovereignty, and human noetic dependence are precisely the topics of these texts. It is what they are manifestly *about*. If that is what "modernist theory of epistemological holism" is supposed to mean, then Gaffin has "imported" nothing.

Moreover, Mathison's objection is not at all to the notions of God's omniscience, sovereignty, or human noetic dependence. He, after all, is a Reformed theologian. And, as it happens, each of these basic architectural support structures of Van Til's epistemology are provided not by F.H. Bradley or Bernard Bosanquet, but by the very Reformed orthodoxy he shares with Keith Mathison.

Mathison fully knows this, or at least knew it at one time. In 2019 he published an earlier evaluation of Van Til's thought for *TableTalk* magazine, in which he wrote:

Van Til's explanation of God's knowledge is *fairly typical of classic Reformed theology*. God is omniscient, and His knowledge of Himself and of all things is comprehensive. Man, on the other hand, even in his unfallen state, is a finite creature, so his knowledge is limited and partial.²⁰

What is astonishing is that in that previous 15,000 word analysis of Van Til, Mathison typed the word "holism" zero

20. Keith A. Mathison, "Christianity and VanTillianism," *TableTalk*, August 21, 2019 (<https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/christianity-and-van-tillianism-2019-08>) Emphasis added. In a corresponding footnote, he adds, "Van Til even uses the Reformed scholastic distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology."

times. Not a single mention of a “modernist theory of epistemological holism.” On the contrary, he noted:

Van Til was educated against the background of philosophical idealism, and the language of this school of thought permeates his writings. It is important to note that Van Til did *not* formally adopt idealism as a system of thought and was instead highly critical of it in his writings, but he wanted to speak the language of the educated class of his day. To do this, he borrowed idealist terms and concepts and adapted them for his own purposes.²¹

What occurred over the past six years to transform “Man ... even in his unfallen state, is a finite creature, so his knowledge is limited and partial” into “As Van Til explains it, true knowledge is knowledge of any fact in its relation to God and in its relation to every other fact”? What transformed “Van Til did *not* formally adopt idealism as a system of thought and was instead highly critical of it in his writings” into Van Til believed the “false modernist theory of epistemological holism” taught by the British idealists? What certainly did not occur is any change in Van Til or his writings. This new line of critique is so novel for Mathison the paint is still wet, and its luster ought to prove short-lived.

21. Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

THE WONDERFUL ONE-HOSS SHAY

Alternatively, perhaps what Carini and Mathison are suggesting is that for Van Til human knowledge is akin to the “one-hoss shay” or “Deacon’s Masterpiece” described by poet Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1858: a perfectly designed carriage built to last, with each part perfectly made and perfectly contributing to the whole; this also means, as the clergyman discovers, that the failure of the minutest part involves the instantaneous and complete failure and disintegration of every other part. As Holmes tells it:

*The Parson was working his Sunday’s text,—
Had got to fifthly, and stopped perplexed
At what the—Moses—was coming next.
All at once the horse stood still,
Close by the meet’n’-house on the hill.
—First a shiver, and then a thrill,
Then something decidedly like a spill,—
And the parson was sitting upon a rock,
At half-past nine by the meet’n’-house-clock,
Just the hour of the Earthquake-shock!
—What do you think the parson found,
When he got up and stared around?
The poor old chaise in a heap or mound,
As if it had been to the mill and ground!
You see, of course, if you’re not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,—
All at once, and nothing first,—
Just as bubbles do when they burst.*

*End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.
Logic is logic. That’s all I say.*

It is a splendid literary critique of 18th and 19th century rationalism.²² And now this very sort of rationalism is apparently charged to Cornelius Van Til's account: ignorance, misunderstanding, or failure to account for a single fact renders all knowledge of every other fact null and void. "It went to pieces all at once,— All at once, and nothing first,— Just as bubbles do when they burst."

It is obviously true that, for Van Til, lacking noetic submission to the knowledge of God already possessed by every single image-bearer by virtue of creation has catastrophic effects for the knowledge of anything else, which is what Romans 1:18ff teaches in rather straightforward fashion. But not because of *Idealism* and its "one-hoss shay" or "closed system" in which the human knower must comprehend reality exhaustively or not at all.²³ Not because he thought God a "lynchpin" in the design of an intellectual carriage that, once removed, reduces the whole thing to dust. Not because, in the words of Joel Carini, for Van Til God is a "missing piece of knowledge" that by its absence distorts the whole. Rather, Van Til believed in God's relevance to human knowledge of any and every fact because, in his view, *God is not a "fact."* He is not a "piece of knowledge," an additional bit of information that one absorbs and assimilates into one's preexisting mental frame.

22. For all its delightful whimsy, the fact that the shay disintegrates at the very anniversary hour of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, an event that turned Enlightenment optimism into widespread despair, demonstrates Holmes's philosophical sophistication.

23. It is stunning to continue to witness Van Til being accused of Idealism. He opposed it with every instance of his use of the phrase, "self-contained ontological Trinity." That is to say, with practically his every breath. The transcendence (aseity) of God is the bedrock of his entire worldview.

In his legendary 1985 debate with atheist Gordon Stein, Christian philosopher Greg Bahnsen began his opening statement by challenging Stein's very understanding of the question of God's existence. Stein had written, "The question of the existence of God is a factual question and should be answered in the same way as any other factual question." Bahnsen's reply is worth reproducing in full:

We might ask, 'Is there a box of crackers in the pantry?' And we know how we would go about answering that question. But that is a far, far cry from the way we go about answering questions or determining the reality of, say, barometric pressure, quasars, gravitational attraction, elasticity, radioactivity, natural laws, names, grammar, numbers, the university itself that you're now at, past events, categories, future contingencies, laws of thought, political obligations, individual identity over time, causation, memories, dreams, or even love or beauty. In such cases, one does not do anything like walking to the pantry and looking inside for the crackers. There are thousands of existence or factual questions and they are not at all answered in the same way in each case.

Just think of the difference in argumentation and types of evidence used by biologists, grammarians, physicists, mathematicians, lawyers, logicians, mechanics, merchants, and artists. It should be obvious from this that the types of evidence one looks for in existence or factual claims will be determined by the field of discussion and *especially by the metaphysical nature of the entity mentioned in the claim under question*. Dr. Stein's remark that the question of the existence of God is answered in the same way as any other factual question,

mistakenly reduces the theistic question to the same level as the box of crackers in the pantry, which we will hereafter call the crackers in the pantry fallacy.²⁴

Knowledge of God is unlike knowledge of created things because of the *metaphysical nature of the entity mentioned*: God is not a creature. He is the Creator, and as such he is the transcendental precondition and ground for all human knowledge and predication whatsoever—even *denials of him*.²⁵ The Word who was with God and was God and through whom “all things were made” is the “light that gives light to every man” (Jn 1:4, 9). There is no other source of light, for all else is *creature*, and, thus, derivative and reflective. “Without *him* nothing was made that has been made” (Jn. 1:3), which is to say there is nothing—*no fact*—that exists independently of him in any way, shape, or form. The impossibility of “brute fact” is right there in the prologue of the fourth gospel.

Van Til expresses in modern language the view of Reformed scholastic Pierre Du Moulin (1568-1655). Richard A. Muller explains:

Du Moulin’s respect for the powers of the mind is tempered, however, from the very outset of his argument by his view of the necessity of revelation: *because God is not an object to be perceived but is the fountain of light by*

24. “Does God Exist?” debate transcript: 3. (https://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/Bahnsen-Stein_Transcript.pdf). Emphasis added.

25. C.f., Don Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65:2 (Fall 2003): 289-306. Drawing on the work of Peter Strawson, Collett contends that Van Til’s transcendental argument is distinctive from traditional arguments in that it is valid for both affirmations and negations of God’s existence.

which man perceives all things, ‘God cannot be known ... unless he infuse our souls with true knowledge of himself.’²⁶

In Van Til’s most famous illustration, God is the “lap” upon which the rebellious child sits in order to have the necessary reach and leverage to slap his father’s face. God is not eye-level with his creature, one person among others who might get overlooked in a crowded room, a “fact” alongside other facts. Much less is he on an upper floor waiting for the natural man to make his way up the stairs to discover him. Knowledge of him is not something one “adds on” to preexisting knowledge of his creation and natural order. God is something else entirely: The transcendent, self-existent, Triune *Creator* who reveals himself “plainly” (Rom.1:19), who is “clearly seen” and “understood” through “the things that have been made” (Rom.1:20).²⁷ The Word is the one in whom “all things hold together” (Col 1:17), which means he is the *precondition*, the *sine qua non* of any “fact” and its relation to any other fact at all. God is, as Paul reminds his Athenian audience by way of a philosopher who spoke better than he really acknowledged, the one “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

To suppose that God is a “piece of knowledge” is to join Gordon Stein in what Bahnsen called the “Crackers in the Pantry” fallacy. A man may look in the pantry for a box of crackers and, to the consternation of wives everywhere, not

26. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 1: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003): 297. Emphasis added.

27. Note: not *capable* of being “clearly seen” and “understood.” Rather, “clearly seen” and “understood.”

see it right there in plain sight. This oversight makes no substantial difference at all to the man's basic reasoning capacities or sense perception (other than a mere momentary lapse), much less the existence, rational coherence, and explicability of the pantry, its other items, the kitchen or the house or the neighborhood (or, for that matter, city, state, country, continent, planet, solar system, galaxy, and universe).

But God is not like a box of crackers in a pantry. His absence in the calculation removes (or, more accurately, actively suppresses the knowledge of) the very metaphysical and epistemological ground of the inquiry in the first place. One and many, subject and object, universal and particular, continuity and change, all of the preconditions for human predication lose their ground and dissolve; the natural man finds himself adrift, party to the ages-old debate between Parmenides and Heraclitus, vacillating between rationalism and irrationalism, materialism and superstition. This is Van Til's critical—and incredibly fruitful—insight, what Frame rightly described as “profoundly biblical and intellectually penetrating.” Suppressing the knowledge of God renders *thinking* “futile,” to use not only the Apostle Paul's express term, but his literal argument (Rom. 1:22). And not just futile with respect to divine or heavenly or soteric truths, as Mathison will go on repeatedly to insist: Paul's immediate example, in unmistakable bold print, is the natural man's corrupt apprehension of *created* things (enumerated explicitly in the vocabulary of Genesis 1, almost as if he had the text of the LXX open in front of him): “mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles.”²⁸

28. One may further observe that the “Crackers in the Pantry” fallacy engaged in by Carini and Mathison here actually—and ironically—involves

The specter of just this sort of epistemic futility haunted even Charles Darwin, who wondered whether his materialist account of—well—“mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles” actually undermines the possibility and reliability of true, meaningful knowledge in the first place. In a letter to William Graham in 1881 he wrote:

Nevertheless you have expressed my inward conviction, though far more vividly and clearly than I could have done, that the Universe is not the result of chance. But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?²⁹

John Lennox expresses Darwin's “horrid doubt” in the sort of memorable fashion Van Til would have loved: “If I shoot myself in the foot, it hurts. If I shoot myself in the

one in the *idealist* error. If God is one “datum” in a universe full of “data”—free floating, independent-of-other-facts, and not altogether necessary—then God is a mere *occupant* of a larger Universe that he shares with man. He could conceivably be overlooked while man successfully and legitimately acquires knowledge of everything else. This was a repeated critique Van Til leveled at Idealism. It did no real justice to the transcendence and absolute-ness of God. Cf., the quote from *Christianity & Idealism* in fn. 8, above.

29. “To William Graham, 3 July 1881,” Darwin Correspondence Project, University of Cambridge. (<https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-13230.xml>). Note well the stunning admission: Darwin wants to maintain an “inward conviction” that the Universe is *not* the result of chance, but it is immediately thwarted by his prior commitment that his own mind is the product of chance (by way of natural selection) and therefore unreliable. A pristine example of the “futility” of the natural man's reasoning.

brain, it is fatal.”³⁰ Materialism, a truth-suppressing ideology if ever there was, undermines, according to Darwin himself, the significance and meaning of any and all human *conviction*—that is, confidence of the truth. In a word, knowledge.

LONELY SILOS SITTING SIDE BY SIDE

It is difficult, to say the least, to credit this accusation that Cornelius Van Til embraced the “false modernist theory of epistemological holism” (Mathison) and that Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “imbibed” (Carini) in this idealist doctrine as a student—as though the professor was slipping modernist contraband to his student on the famously dry Glenside campus.³¹ Given their obvious and relentless antipathy to Idealism, their insistence on the “self-contained ontological Trinity,” the Creator/creature distinction, human epistemic dependence on revelation, the analogical, finite, and partial (i.e., not “univocal”) character of all human knowledge, the accusation is absurd *prima facie*.

Still, “epistemological holism” must mean something in the minds of these critics, difficult as it is to ascertain. As already noted, it cannot be the doctrines of God’s omniscience and sovereignty and human noetic dependence, for the critics agree with those doctrines and reading it that way turns their arguments into literal nonsense. If it means the

30. “By Design: Behe, Lennox, and Meyer on the Evidence for a Creator,” *Uncommon Knowledge*, recorded October 15, 2022 (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=rXexaVsvhCM>)

31. It is said that Professor Murray’s sensitive conscience was such that he took his dram of whisky in the evenings standing on Willow Grove Avenue rather than on campus grounds. One imagines this was prior to the advent of “open container” laws.

epistemology of the British idealists, they have scarcely attempted to establish Van Til's or Gaffin's supposed embrace of that philosophy (this is to dubiously credit "Van Til studied British Idealism" as an attempt). The answer must lie elsewhere. And Mathison, in fact, may have scattered some clues throughout his essay:

That [natural] knowledge of God is sufficient to leave men without excuse, but it is not sufficient for a saving knowledge of God. The knowledge of God which is necessary unto salvation requires special revelation. The WCF differentiates between these two kinds of knowledge of God. Gaffin effectively *conflates* them, arguing that special revelation is necessary for both.

But Gaffin is also *conflating* the knowledge of God known through special revelation with the knowledge of God known through general revelation, and the knowledge of God known through general revelation is manifested to all (cf. Rom. 1:19-20). In addition to this, Gaffin also *conflates* the knowledge of God with the knowledge of all other things (e.g., knowledge of things like rocks and trees). When all of these kinds of knowledge are *conflated*, the things Gaffin is saying are not true.

Paul is not *conflating* knowledge of the doctrine of the Gospel with knowledge of everything in creation. To assert that Paul is making any such claim entirely misses the point Paul is making in this passage.

Gaffin is again *conflating* the saving knowledge found in

the Gospel with knowledge of all things, but he is doing so without any warrant in the text of Scripture itself.

Gaffin's exegesis of Romans 1 becomes confused because of the same *conflation* of different kinds of knowledge that he brought to Matthew 11, Luke 10, and 1 Corinthians 2. Romans 1 does not teach us that unbelievers are simultaneously knowing and ignorant in the way that Van Til and Gaffin say they are, a way that assumes the false modernist theory of epistemological holism.

"Conflates" is the recurring term. This must be what "epistemological holism" means: the belief that knowledge of God and knowledge of creation—e.g., rocks, trees, *ourselves*—are inseparable, mutually influencing, or mutually dependent. Mathison insists, again and again, that to make the knowledge of God necessary for knowledge of the creature is to "conflate" things, to blur or blend together two distinct and—crucially—*separate* things; the implication is that the one is, in essence, unnecessary to the other. Two kinds of knowledge, two "sets" of facts stand like lonely silos on the prairie, side by side with no commerce between them. God, sin, and salvation over here, rocks and trees over there. To suggest that there might be—or *must* be—commerce between these kinds of knowledge, that one must in fact know the one in order to know the other is to "conflate" the knowledge(s) of God and the world. And this is a fatal theological flaw that amounts to embracing the "false modernist doctrine of epistemological holism." Here is a famous example:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God.³²

This, of course, is not modern at all. These are the opening sentences of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. If ever there was a “conflation” of these two kinds of knowledge, of Creator and creature, it is here. So intertwined are knowledge of God and self that Calvin does not know which “precedes and brings forth the other”! Regardless, Calvin insists that the knowledge of God is *constitutive* of what it means to be human: “*no one can* look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God.” B.B. Warfield explains:

If the knowledge of God enters thus into the very idea of humanity and constitutes a law of its being, it follows that it is *given in the same act of knowledge* by which we know ourselves. This position is developed at length in [Calvin’s] opening chapter. The discussion begins with a remark which reminds us of Augustine’s familiar

32. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960): 35.

contention that the proper concern of mankind is the knowledge of God and the soul; to which it is added at once *that these two knowledges are so interrelated that it is impossible to assign the priority to either*. The knowledge of self involves the knowledge of God and also profits by the knowledge of God: the better we know ourselves the better we shall know God, but also, we shall never know ourselves as we really are save in contrast with God, by whom is supplied the only standard for the formation of an accurate judgment upon ourselves (I.i.2). In his analysis of the mode of the implication of the knowledge of God in the knowledge of self, Calvin lays the stress upon our nature as dependent, derived, imperfect, and responsible beings, which *if known at all must be known as such*, and to be known as such must be known as over against that Being on whom we are dependent, to whom we owe our being, over against whom our imperfection is manifest, and to whom we are responsible (I.i.1). As we are not self-existent, we must recognize ourselves as ‘living and moving’ in Another.³³

One can hardly imagine a more “conflated” account than that the knowledge of God is “given in the *same act of knowledge* by which we know ourselves.”³⁴ If the accusation, at the end of the day, is that Van Til and Gaffin are Calvinists, they would have no trouble pleading guilty to

33. B.B. Warfield, *Calvin & Augustine* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1974): 35. Emphasis added.

34. This is the essence of Calvin’s view of the *sensus divinitatis* or “sense of deity.” Knowledge of God is *given with* knowledge of the created world. C.f., K. Scott Oliphint, “Van Til and the *Sensus Divinitatis*,” in *The Future of Reformed Apologetics*, K. Scott Oliphint, ed. (Glenside: Westminster Seminar Press, 2024): 25-48.

the charge. But this is not the charge. Despite the inarguable fact that Calvin's epistemology, as set forth in Book I, Chapter 1 of the *Institutes* engages in the very "holism" he finds so deeply objectionable—indeed, it seems almost an affront—Mathison maintains that it is Van Til and Gaffin who deviate from Calvin and the Reformed tradition more broadly.

REFORMED NATURAL THEOLOGY

This is a common claim, but its popularity does not make it any less mistaken. One may read, for example, Warfield's entire just-cited exposition of Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God and be assured that it is unlikely to contain a single syllable to which Van Til or Gaffin would object. Any apparent "rift" or *casus belli* between Van Til and other Reformed thinkers has little to do with his supposed infidelity to Calvin or early Reformed orthodoxy, as Mathison claims in his final paragraphs. It has everything to do with a long-developing misunderstanding about the place and purpose of natural theology within the Reformed tradition itself. And it turns out that it is Mathison, not Van Til and Gaffin, who is outside the mainstream of Reformed orthodox opinion.

Although it seems in grave danger of being forgotten in certain sectors of the Reformed world, it is a well-established fact that Calvin rejects natural theology: "[It] appears that if men were taught only by nature, they would hold nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god" (I.5.12). In the McNeill-Battles edition, the corresponding footnote to this sentence reads:

Natural theology (human reasoning about God, under the conditions of sin, unaided by special revelation) has been the subject of this chapter through section 12. All scholars agree that the above words present Calvin's verdict upon it, held consistently in all his writings. There is a sharp divergence of opinion, however, among interpreters as to Calvin's view of the usefulness of such natural theology to the Christian, especially its role in the Christian's observation of nature.

In addition to that stark "all scholars agree," note that the debate, the "sharp divergence" of opinion, has to do with the usefulness of natural theology *to the Christian*. Its usefulness to the unbeliever generates no controversy because in Reformed orthodoxy it *has* no positive benefit for the unregenerate. It certainly does not represent "building materials" by which to construct a bridge to saving knowledge of God. The natural knowledge of God by way of general revelation is wholly negative; it leaves the natural man "without excuse." Calvin writes in II.2.22, with respect to natural knowledge with respect to ethics:

The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable. This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.³⁵

35. It is something of an indication of the overall quality of Mathison's scholarship that at one point he cites II.2.18 and calls it "the final section of this discourse." Not quite. This assessment of the negative value of man's knowledge of natural law is four sections beyond.

Lecturing in Amsterdam in 1904, Herman Bavinck explains the Reformed use of natural theology and how it is not at all equivalent to that of Thomas Aquinas, who very much did view natural theology as a “bridge” to saving knowledge of God:

But to whoever might say that the Reformers took *theologia naturalis* from the place that it occupied in Roman Catholicism and just put it somewhere else, it must be pointed out that in Roman Catholicism the *homo naturalis* (“natural man”) first sets to work and sees how far he can take things. The *homo naturalis* lays the foundation of a natural religion, morality, and law. Roman Catholics then erect a supernatural structure on this natural foundation. But from the outset Protestants immediately take their position with both feet firmly planted in special revelation, in Scripture, in Christianity, and occupy and reflect on and ponder nature, history, and so on from that standpoint.³⁶

This ought to disturb Reformed advocates of the so-called “classical” method of apologetics, for Bavinck here places the Reformers in direct opposition to such a procedure. “Immediately tak[ing] their position with both feet firmly planted in special revelation, in Scripture, in Christianity” sounds suspiciously like a description of Van Til’s presuppositional apologetic.³⁷ Bavinck continues:

36. Herman Bavinck, *Foremost Problems in Contemporary Dogmatics*, Bruce R. Pass and Gert De Kok, eds., trans. (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2025): 58.

37. For more on Bavinck’s own seminal influence on Van Til’s thinking, see Brian G. Mattson, “Van Til’s Apologetic: Attributes, Roots, and Fruits” in *The Future of Reformed Apologetics*: 49-68.

Protestants are not first a person and then Christians. Rather, they are at once Christians, and for this reason and to that extent they are human beings. *Theologia naturalis* is taken up in *theologia supernaturalis* ("supernatural theology"). It is not treated before but within Christian dogmatics. There is no dualism. Rather, there is a unified worldview.

[...] With the Reformed, however, everything is ruled by Christian principles, also the state, law, art. The Reformed have conceptualized Christianity, not only as a religion but also as a *Weltanschauung* ("worldview"). Hence, *theologia naturalis* ("natural theology") can only be practiced by believers. *Fides* ("faith") is necessary even here, just as it is with *revelatio supernaturalis* ("supernatural revelation").³⁸

"Natural theology can only be practiced by believers." For one who believes at face value the strident rhetoric of many of Van Til's critics, particularly those invested in the "retrieval" of a Reformed Thomism, this must appear as some sort of bizarre revisionist history. In contrast, Mathison writes:

[A]ll of the orthodox Reformed theologians of the 16th and much of the 17th century affirmed a non-rationalistic natural theology. They taught than [sic] man can and does come to some knowledge of God through the use of reason in the examination of the created world. And those who addressed the question offered numerous proofs for the existence of God that moved from knowledge of the created world to the existence of

38. Herman Bavinck, *Foremost Problems*: 58-59.

the Creator. That was the view of the men who wrote the Reformed confessions.

In reality, Bavinck's assessment of the "men who wrote the Reformed confessions" is on far sounder ground. Consider this claim from the world's foremost authority on Reformed scholastic theology:

The Protestant orthodox include virtually no natural theology in their systems and never view natural theology, human reason, or the light of nature as a foundation upon which revealed theology can build.³⁹

This is a somewhat shocking claim. One who has grown accustomed to assuming Mathison's point of view might think it an exaggeration or a rare comment that conflicts with Muller's (impressively exhaustive) research elsewhere. Not so:

Since the mode of communication of natural theology is revelation, natural theology must be discussed together with supernatural theology. What is more, as indicated by the Reformed orthodox paradigm of true and false, archetypal and ectypal theology, the true, ectypal *theologia naturalis* is founded not on the interaction of reason in general with the natural order (so that it is not equated with natural sciences like astronomy or physics)

39. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985): 302.

*but on the examination of natural revelation by faithful reason.*⁴⁰

The “interaction of reason in general with the natural order,” done under the conditions of sin and absent divine special revelation, is generally categorized at the outset of Reformed scholastic systems as *theologia falsa*—false, contradictory, unstable and unreliable pagan religion. It therefore had no place in Reformed systems of *theology*.⁴¹ The only legitimate natural theology is that done under *theologia vera*—true religion, aided by the light of special revelation. Muller explains further:

Natural theology as considered by Polanus and the other Protestant scholastics is not necessarily or always a pagan or false theology: it can be a Christian, true theology. What is more, it cannot be severed absolutely from revealed or supernatural theology: it is clearly a form of revelation, and its origin and object are supernatural—namely, God. *Theologia naturalis*, in this limited, Christian sense of a *cogito Dei creatoris*, resting on the natural order but clarified by Scripture itself, is distinct from *theologia supernaturalis* primarily in terms of the mode of revelation and the goal or purpose (*finis*) of theology.⁴²

40. Richard A. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:282. Emphasis added.

41. It could hardly be otherwise in a Calvinist theological tradition. See, for example, *Institutes*, I.5.11-12.

42. Muller, *PRRD*, 1: 294. C.f., *Synopsis of a Purer Theology, Volume 1*, William Den Boer and Reimer A. Faber, eds., Reimer A. Faber, trans. (Davenant Press, 2023): I.6-7: “In this locus we restrict Theology only to persons who are proceeding in *faith* in the current age, and in order to differentiate it, we call it ‘the Theology of revelation.’ 7. Taken more broadly, revelation

Natural theology “cannot be severed” from revealed or supernatural theology. It *requires*, on this account, the clarification of Scripture. There are no lonely, independent silos here. Following Calvin, flowing, as it were, from the very first paragraph of his *magnum opus*, the early scholastic period represents a tradition-wide indissoluble *tethering* of true knowledge of the world to the knowledge of God as revealed in Scripture. Muller’s concluding paragraph on the Reformed scholastic understanding of natural theology could not be more emphatic, and more emphatically divergent to Mathison’s account:

We must object strenuously, therefore, to the all-too-frequent and utterly erroneous claim that orthodox or scholastic Protestant theology generally viewed natural revelation and the natural theology drawn from it as a foundation on which supernatural revelation and a supernatural theology can build [...] Rather, supernatural revelation, identified not so much as an unnatural or preternatural way of knowing but as a graciously given way of knowing, provides the context within which all other knowledge must ultimately be understood. The problem is not one of the hegemony of reason over revelation but rather one of the proper use of revelation over against the purely rational or natural.⁴³

That bears repeating: supernatural (or “special”) revelation is a “graciously given way of knowing” that “provides the context within which *all other knowledge must ulti-*

can be divided into natural and supernatural revelation.” Note that *both* “natural” and “supernatural” revelation are properly appropriated by *faith*.

43. Muller, *PRRD*, 1: 310.

mately be understood.” One may deride this as “epistemological holism,” but it is the view of Calvin, of Reformed orthodox theology and, more to the point, it is obviously the view of Cornelius Van Til and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. who, equally obviously, did not borrow it from British idealists. Jeffery K. Jue observes:

According to Protestant scholastics, natural theology has no positive function for the unregenerate and only a confirmatory role for the regenerate. Natural theology was never considered to be a rational exercise that would lead the unbeliever to the truth of the gospel.

As somewhat of an appendix to this historical study, it is worth noting a connection between the Protestant scholastics and Cornelius Van Til. While Van Til was mistaken in his assessment of the Protestant scholastics’ teachings, his views are in fact quite similar. Van Til’s understanding of the exclusively negative function of natural theology for the unbeliever resembles that of the seventeenth century. Moreover, Van Til’s insistence on denying the use of natural theology as a starting point is a consistent implication of the Protestant scholastic position.⁴⁴

What happened to this early Reformed orthodox consensus, described so forcefully by Muller? How did it come to pass that Van Til’s basically Calvinist epistemology, his insistence on the Reformed archetypal and ectypal

44. Jeffery K. Jue, “*Theologia Naturalis*: A Reformed Tradition,” in *Revelation & Reason*, Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007): 188. Jue highlights the irony that Van Til himself to some extent misunderstood and/or exaggerated his differences with the Reformed scholastics, when in fact he was closer to their views than his critics.

scheme, the noetic effects of sin, analogical knowledge, the self-attestation of Scripture, the necessity of regeneration and faith, the need for Scriptural illumination for human beings to know the world and themselves truly—all *standard fare* Reformed convictions—are now viewed as deviant and subjected to condescending opprobrium by present-day erstwhile Reformed theologians? Bavinck explains:

[P]arallel to the Reformation there arose all manner of new disciplines, which emancipated themselves from Scripture and the church. Science became independent; humanism was not conquered by the Reformation but continued its course alongside the Reformation. Hence, this also happened among the Reformed, who after all had acknowledged the relative right of *theologia naturalis*, and agreed more and more that *theologia naturalis* should be independent, and extracted it from Scripture and faith and placed it on the outside with only natural reason to construct it.⁴⁵

This casts a rather salutary forward-looking light on Van Til and Gaffin. It is their critic who is insisting on the independence of natural theology from Scripture and faith. Bavinck suggests that this separation became increasingly inevitable, given the adoption of Thomas's framework in the wake of a Reformed lacuna in philosophy.

It was a big mistake among the Reformed that they did not recognize the necessity of a Christian philosophy. When they soon had need of a philosophy, they adopted

45. Bavinck, *Foremost Problems*: 75.

the framework of Aristotle and Thomas. Thus, *theologia naturalis* was immediately placed next to *theologia supernaturalis* ("supernatural theology"). From this it followed that *theologia naturalis* became one of the sciences that were independent of Scripture and *fides* ("faith"), that the strength of the proofs for God's existence and so on were overestimated, that the darkness of natural reason was minimized, that the light of natural reason came to be regarded as sufficient, and that *ratio* ("reason") and *fides* ought to stand dualistically side by side on the scientific domain as they do in Thomas.⁴⁶

Viewing matters from the angle of this insightful historical observation, one might consider that Van Til represents nothing other than the development of just such a Reformed philosophy, one that "circles back" to recover and consistently work out Reformed epistemological principles.⁴⁷ Bavinck's view is that the early Reformed left this task underdeveloped and that their (otherwise understandable) adoption of Roman Catholicism's ready-made framework was in many ways alien to Calvin's theological instincts. He goes on to explain that this tension was bound to grow over time.

Theologia naturalis ("natural theology") became *theologia rationalis* ("rational theology"). That is, in the earliest times a single, unified knowledge of God arose from two *principia* ("foundations"), nature and Scrip-

46. Ibid, 75-76.

47. And, in point of fact, this is precisely how Van Til viewed his project. Suffice it to say, this assessment from Bavinck helps to explain why self-conscious Reformed "retrievalists" of Thomas Aquinas appear so scandalized by Van Til.

ture, and was derived by a single, Christian, believing reason (*ratio fidelis*). But gradually this contrast changed completely, and the two *principia* were identified as *ratio* and *revelatio* (“revelation”). *Ratio* was cut adrift from *revelatio* and posited as an independent principle of knowledge over against *revelatio*. Therewith began all the conflicts in the Reformed church about their relationship in which reason ever gained and revelation ever lost more ground.⁴⁸

What happened is that theologians built silos, and one grew bigger and the other grew smaller.

WHEN SIN IS WELL-BEHAVED

Gaffin’s essay represents the dismantling of these silos. A brief summary: he carefully and painstakingly draws forth Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching that Christ, by his Spirit, is the revealer of *all things*, the *principium* of knowledge, the true Wisdom standing over against the foolishness of “the world” and the philosopher of “this age.” This wisdom and revelation is antithetical to the reasoning of the sinful natural man, and it is as comprehensive in scope as the kingdom of God itself: *τα παντα*, “all things.” In Christ *all things* consist or “hold together” (Col. 1:17); in Christ are hidden “*all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col.

48. Bavinck, *Foremost Problems*, 75-6. C.f., Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I:306. Few disagree—not even Mathison—with this assessment of how Reformed theology made a “rationalist” turn in the latter half of the 17th century. Many would object to Bavinck’s view of the root cause: the separating of what Calvin had joined together—a “single, unified knowledge of God,” arising “from two *principia*, nature and Scripture,” and “derived by a single, Christian, believing reason.”

2:3); Christ is the head of *all things* in heaven and on earth; *all things* are “summed up” in him (Eph. 1:10); for a person to make a judgment about “all things,” he must have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

Mathison’s (non)response is repeatedly to chide Gaffin for not properly observing the boundaries of his preferred epistemic silos (i.e., “Gaffin conflates”). For Mathison “all things” actually means “some things”—heavenly things, redemptive things, “Gospel” things like sin and salvation. It does not—cannot possibly—include knowledge of creaturely things like “rocks and trees.”

There are, according to Mathison, three distinct categories of knowledge:

There is an important difference between the knowledge of created things such as rocks and trees, the knowledge of God that can be known by means of an examination of God’s general revelation through such created things, and the saving knowledge of God and the Gospel that can be known only through God’s special revelation. The way in which we come to knowledge of each of these is also different.

The natural man knows created things (Silo 1). If he closely examines those created things, there is a certain non-salvific knowledge of God that may be perceived in those created things (Silo 2). The natural man can only attain saving knowledge of God and the Gospel through special revelation (Silo 3).

With regard to Silo 2, it should be observed that on this account it is sometimes empty. It *can* be filled with a kind of knowledge of God upon concerted investigation. This does scant justice to biblical teaching about the nature of created

things. Revelation is not something obscure or hidden in created things: God “has made it *plain* to them” (Rom. 1:19). It is not as though natural things like rocks and trees, and “mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles,” have some basic ontological status prior to or independent of being “revelation.” They *are*, according to Paul, revelations of God. “God-revealer” is not some separable or *added* attribute to a rock or tree, and so the division between Silos 1 and 2 is entirely artificial: one does not, in fact, know (1) without knowing (2). (2), to the extent that one grants that it “exists”—that is, the extent to which this framework of knowledge should be accepted—is *never* empty. And it is precisely because the natural man always knows (2) that he is “without excuse” in his misapprehension of (1).

For Mathison’s purposes, it is the division between (1) and (3) that is the more pressing matter. His reply—essentially *sole* reply⁴⁹—to Gaffin’s exegesis is to insist that Silo 3, saving knowledge of God through Christ and special revelation, is *irrelevant* to Silo 1. When Paul speaks of the “futility” of the mind he is referring only to the failure or inability of the natural man to grasp the truths of “the Gospel” or “heavenly” matters like sin and salvation. This inability makes no difference to the unbeliever’s knowledge of created things.⁵⁰ To suggest it does is to “conflate” two distinct objects of knowledge, or, to put the matter into the

49. Readers would do well to simply overlook the unfortunate passages in which Mathison presumes to instruct Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., about what Paul means by *mystēria* or, even more incredibly, about the centrality of the resurrection in Paul’s theology.

50. At this point, Joel Carini’s essay may be left to the side, since he openly throws his support to this Thomistic articulation of a division between “natural” and “supernatural” knowledge. His critique of Gaffin’s actual exegesis is essentially an appeal to Thomas’s treatment of these passages. But to his credit, his evaluation of Gaffin is of a far more modest and defensible kind

newly fashioned phrase, to engage in “the false modernist theory of epistemological holism.”

Sin, it would appear, is very well-behaved in its noetic effects; like the occasional prairie tornado, it only works its destructive and disintegrating power on one silo while leaving the one next to it unscathed. If there is anything that seems to bother Mathison most about Van Til’s epistemology, it is the idea that sin undermines the integrity of, or makes equivocal or ambiguous the contents of, the “silo” of natural human knowledge. In his earlier work in *TableTalk*, he is mystified at Van Til’s seemingly contradictory claims regarding the unbeliever’s knowledge:

The lack of clarity on the question of what unbelievers know can best be illustrated by asking what Van Til means when he uses the word *true* to modify the word *knowledge* or *truly* to modify the word *know*. Van Til says that it is ‘impossible for man to have *true knowledge* about anything apart from the Bible.’ And again, ‘We hold it to be definitely anti-Christian to say that any man can have any *true knowledge* of anything except through the wisdom of Christ.’ Again, ‘man cannot, unless the scales be removed from his eyes, know anything truly about God or anything else.’ Again, ‘without the light of Scripture, no fact can be known truly.’ Finally, “Not one single fact in this universe can be known truly by man without the existence of God.’ There are many more statements to the same effect, but these examples should suffice to make the point. It seems abundantly clear that Van Til believes

than Mathison’s: he merely thinks that the texts under consideration are “underdetermined” and *could* support either view.

that the nonbeliever cannot have true knowledge. He says it repeatedly. Yet, Van Til also says regarding the nonbeliever, 'I have never denied that he has *true knowledge*.' How can Van Til deny saying something that he says over and over again? Either Van Til's teaching on 'knowledge' is inherently self-contradictory or he is using the same terms to mean different things (i.e., equivocation). Neither option is theologically or logically attractive.⁵¹

While Mathison at that point left it an open question whether there might be any explanation for these ambiguities, he now believes them to be a figment of the imagination—the product of a “false modernist theory.” In response to Gaffin, he writes:

Regarding what Gaffin says in the subsection titled, 'The Unbeliever's Knowledge,' the Bible can be said to speak in an equivocal tone about the unbeliever's knowledge only if we fail to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge as Scripture does. Once those different kinds of knowledge are recognized, the so-called ambiguity and equivocation that Gaffin attributes to Scripture disappears. Gaffin finds equivocation and ambiguity in the Bible on this point because he is reading the Bible through the lenses of Van Til's false modernist epistemological theory [...] Romans 1 does not teach us that unbelievers are simultaneously knowing and ignorant in the way that Van Til and Gaffin say they are, a way that assumes the false modernist theory of epistemological holism.

51. Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism."

In other words, if one reads the Bible with the various silos sorted out and respected, the “so-called ambiguity” disappears. Paul does *not* teach that unbelievers are “simultaneously knowing and ignorant.” Sin stays neatly contained behind its noetic partition and does not, in fact, produce equivocation or ambiguity in the portion of the mind directed toward earthly things. At this point, it would greatly benefit readers to put in full relief the breathtaking superficiality of this reply by comparing it directly to the relevant passage from Gaffin:

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 under-

stand and do not understand, and they do so in the same *cognitive* moment.⁵² 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.). What they believe is God’s truth exchanged for a lie (v. 25), and their *minds* are corrupted, worthless (ἄδόκιμος, v. 28).

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). 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’

52. Note how this corresponds directly to Calvin’s view, as Warfield expressed it, that knowledge of God is given “in the *same act of knowledge* with which we know ourselves.” When the knowledge of the one is corrupted and obscured, so is knowledge of the other. If one wonders, as so many of Van Til’s critics do, how the knowledge of God is “given” in the *same act* of knowing the creature, the answer is that God is the *very light by which one sees and knows anything at all*. Suppressing the knowledge of God, one might say, “turns out the light.” Paul even says it: their hearts were *darkened* (ἐσκοτίσθη).

(διαλογισμός) that are ‘futile,’ ‘worthless.’ The heart is ‘foolish,’ that is, literally ‘without understanding’ (ἀσύνετος), lacking comprehension.⁵³

Mathison has no answer to Gaffin’s direct challenge: where is the exegetical basis for divvying up knowledge between “cognitive” (or “adequate” intellectual knowledge) in vv. 18-20 and “more than cognitive” (i.e., intimate or saving knowledge) in vv. 21ff? Mathison’s response is to baldly reassert the very thing being challenged: literally, *Gaffin is confused because he doesn’t know that knowledge is divided up between natural and saving knowledge*. To put it mildly, this does not count as the beginning of a sketch of an answer to Gaffin’s exegetical challenge. It remains incumbent upon critics to provide a Scriptural rationale for why Paul’s intellectual “futility” and “darkened understanding” refers only to a certain kind or segment of knowledge. Why does the silo containing the “rocks and trees” remain untouched?

OF ROCKS AND TREES

Mathison’s claim that the Bible contains no equivocation or ambiguity about the unbeliever’s knowledge and that such can only be imported into Scripture from some foreign philosophy cannot be taken seriously. Indeed, Mathison himself does not take it seriously. In his essay, he writes his own mini-commentary on Romans 1:

According to Scripture, idols have eyes but do not see, and they have ears but do not hear (Psalm 115:5-6). This

53. Gaffin, “Some Epistemological Reflections,” 119-20.

is how unbelievers became ‘fools,’ because as Scripture indicates, we become like what we worship (Psalm 115:8; cf. Isa. 44:18). This is why *unbelievers have eyes but cannot see and ears but cannot hear*.

What is that but a paradoxical description of *epistemic* impotence taken directly from the text of Scripture, the very kind he was just accusing Gaffin of “importing” into the Scriptures? But it is felicitous that he has obliquely drawn attention to Isaiah chapter 44. Verses 13-20 are instructive:

The carpenter measures with a line
and makes an outline with a marker;
he roughs it out with chisels
and marks it with compasses.
He shapes it in the form of man,
of man in all his glory,
that it may dwell in a shrine.
He cut down cedars,
or perhaps took a cypress or oak.
He let it grow among the trees of the forest,
or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.
It is man’s fuel for burning;
some of it he takes and warms himself,
he kindles a fire and bakes bread.
But he also fashions a god and worships it;
he makes an idol and bows down to it.
Half of the wood he burns in the fire;
over it he prepares his meal,
he roasts his meat and eats his fill.
He also warms himself and says,
“Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.”

From the rest he makes a god, his idol;
 he bows down to it and worships.
 He prays to it and says,
 "Save me; you are my god."
 They know nothing, they understand nothing;
 their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
 and their minds closed so they cannot understand.⁵⁴
 No one stops to think,
 no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
 "Half of it I used for fuel;
 I even baked bread over its coals,
 I roasted meat and I ate.
 Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
 Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"
 He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him;
 he cannot save himself, or say,
 "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

They know *nothing*? They understand *nothing*? Their eyes are plastered over and they *cannot see*? Their minds are closed so they *cannot understand*? What could Isaiah possibly mean? Clearly, the carpenter knows what a "tree" is. He planted it, harvested it, made a fire, warmed himself, and baked bread. He measured it, outlined it with a marker,

54. The elegant English translation chosen here (NIV84), as many do, obscures the direct influence on Paul's language in Rom. 1:21 by associating understanding with the "mind." The LXX here locates the lack of comprehension in the *heart*: "νοῆσαι τῇ καρδίᾳ" ("to understand with the heart"); c.f., Paul's "ἀσύνετος καρδίᾳ" ("uncomprehending heart"). In Isaiah the eyes are "dimmed or darkened" (ἀπόἀμαυρώω) so that the "heart" does not understand; in Paul, "their uncomprehending hearts were darkened" ("ἔσκοτίσθη"). Paul's critique of idolatry draws directly from this text.

roughed it out with a chisel, marked it with a compass. How can anyone say he knows *nothing*?

If this were Van Til instead of the LORD through the mouth of Isaiah, one imagines Mathison would be obliged to declare that this is either “inherently self-contradictory” or “he is using the same terms to indicate different things.”⁵⁵ His verdict should likewise be the same: “Neither option is theologically or logically attractive.” However, the Bible is unconcerned with what Mathison finds theologically or logically attractive. More to the point, *sin* in its noetic effects is unconcerned—*inherently* does not care—about observing “logical” patterns nor is it hesitant to breach the exterior walls of imagined epistemic silos.

Every year Tucson, Arizona hosts the largest gem, mineral, and fossil show in the world. Thousands of exhibitors descend on multiple convention centers and hotels and parking lots to create a marketplace unlike any other. Any and every conceivable gemstone, rock, fossil, or mineral is on display and for sale. A vendor can tell one of the millions of would-be buyers everything there is to know about a given specimen: the exact molecular composition, where it is found in the geologic column, perhaps even the exact location of the mine or deposit in Brazil or Peru. They clearly know rocks.

A great many of these vendors will then go on to explain each stone’s unique spiritual energies and mystical healing properties. This ought to prompt one to wonder: *does this person know what a rock is?* Clearly, yes. Also, clearly no. The natural man digs, chisels, cuts, polishes, and then bows down to a block. Others, perhaps not so “spiritual,” might nevertheless insist that this or that rock or

55. Mathison, “Christianity and Van Tillianism,” *TableTalk*.

formation or fossil is a testament to the blind happenstance (perhaps even the eternity) of the cosmos; proof positive that the earth is devoid of the hands and workmanship of God. *Does this person know what a rock is?*

She knows the tree. She has a degree in forestry and conservation. She capably describes the genetic ancestry of this or that particular species, plots on a map its native habitat, and identifies and lobbies to protect old-growth virginial groves. But the tree is also a living, breathing divinity; to cut it down is decide, to make Gaïa, "Mother," cry out in agony. Our ecologist might turn the tree into a shrine—a modern-day Asherah pole. She might even climb to its heights and make her home there to keep loggers from desecrating it. In more ancient times a grove of such trees became home to mysterious midnight meetings with dark sexual rituals. *Does she know what a tree is?* Clearly, yes. And clearly, no.

Mathison's tidy epistemological scheme is untrue to the Bible, untrue to Reformed theology, and untrue to lived experience. It is not true that absent the saving knowledge of God the unbeliever's knowledge of everything else remains unaffected. When one suppresses the knowledge of God that is clearly perceived and known in the things that have been made, one then worships and serves the things that have been made, *which is to say one no longer truly knows either God or the things that have been made.*

Put yet another way, "creature" is the basic, primary attribute of anything other than God. If this is not recognized by human cognition because of suppression of this truth, the "idol factory" (Calvin) that is the natural man will fancy it the Creator—which, in a primary sense, is *not to know what it is*. This is the theological anthropology of Isaiah 44, of Paul in Romans 1, of the great apologists of

the 2nd century, of Augustine with his *non posse non peccare*, of Calvin in Book I of the *Institutes*, of the Reformed orthodox scholastics with their *theologia falsa*, of Bavinck, of Van Til, and of Gaffin. To truly know “rocks and trees,” one must know them as they *are*; as Maltbie Babcock (1858-1901) described it in his famous hymn:

*This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas--
His hand the wonders wrought.*

Compare the simplistic, two-dimensional epistemology of Mathison's lonely silos standing independently side by side with Herman Bavinck's following observations about the natural man's relationship to the natural world. It bears every hallmark Mathison has identified as “the false modernist doctrine of epistemological holism.” In fact, it is a deeply profound, penetrating, and pristine Reformed—indeed, catholic *Christian*—assessment of the unbeliever's situation.

As a result of this worldview Christianity has overcome both the contempt of nature and its deification. In paganism a human being does not stand in the right relationship to God, and *therefore not to the world either*. Similarly, in pantheism and materialism the relation of human beings to nature is *fundamentally corrupted*. One moment man considers himself infinitely superior

to nature and believes that it no longer has any secrets for him. The next moment he experiences nature as a dark and mysterious power that he does not understand, whose riddles he cannot solve, and from whose power he cannot free himself. Intellectualism and mysticism alternate. Unbelief makes way for superstition, and materialism turns into occultism. But the Christian looks upward and confesses God as the Creator of heaven and earth. In nature and history he observes the unfathomability of the ways of God and the unsearchability of his judgments, but he does not despair, for all things are subject to the government of an omnipotent God and a gracious Father, and they will therefore work together for good to those who love God. Here, accordingly, there is room for love and admiration of nature, but all deification is excluded. *Here a human being is placed in the right relation to the world because he has been put in the right relation to God.*⁵⁶

Though this comes from the pen of Van Til's intellectual predecessor, Gaffin is nevertheless correct: "[W]hat [Van Til] says about the unbeliever's knowledge, far from betraying a vitiating flaw in his thinking, points up a singular and important strength." John Frame is, in fact, correct: "[Van Til's] account of the metaphysics of knowledge merits superlative commendation. It is profoundly biblical and intellectually penetrating, and it provides

56. Bavinck, RD II: 438. Emphasis added. Marvel for a moment at what Bavinck says are the foundations of a Christian, that is, *true*, apprehension of nature: the transcendence of God the *Creator*, his exhaustive and "unfathomable" *plan*, and his absolute *sovereignty*. Motifs that ought by now to be familiar to readers.

substantial clarification of the fundamental nature of human thought.”

In his *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, Greg L. Bahnsen grouped together an entire collection of Van Til's writings, along with his own analysis, under the heading, “The Psychological Complexities of Unbelief.”⁵⁷ Bahnsen's own dissertation for his PhD in philosophy at the University of Southern California was entitled, “A Conditional Resolution of the Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception.”⁵⁸ The reader may be assured that Mathison's proposed resolution—that the “so-called ambiguity” magically disappears by sorting between “different kinds of knowledge”—would likely not qualify for the degree. Arguably no other theological or apologetic approach or “school of thought” comes anywhere near as close as Van Til's to diagnosing—and remedying—the complex nature of human unbelief. This, coupled with its biblical grounding and self-conscious commitment to a Reformed theology and anthropology, is why it continues to flourish.

THE SALVATION OF KNOWLEDGE

People can know things but not know them. For all the *faux* consternation of critics who object to the wide variety of ways Van Til attempted to express this (e.g., “*true* knowledge,” to “know *truly*”), it is a phenomenon familiar to everyone.⁵⁹ Often someone will arrive at a new under-

57. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1998): 405-460.

58. Greg L. Bahnsen, “A Conditional Resolution of the Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” Ph.D. dissertation, *University of Southern California* (1978).

59. On this note, it is too infrequently pointed out that the subject matter

standing or appreciation for something they thought they knew, and explain the change with a mundane analogy that profoundly points to a deeper reality: “I saw it in a *new light*.” A person may even say it is the kind of light that makes him wonder if he ever “really knew” the thing at all.⁶⁰

In the 1996 German-language film, *The Lives of Others*, playwright Georg Dreyman lives through a harrowing experience as he publishes a dissident article for a West German publication under the very noses of the Stasi. He knows the facts of what happened. He was there. But it turns out he does not “really know” anything. Only after he discovers that he had been under intense surveillance does “new light” dawn. He had in fact been living the entire time by the unlikely hidden grace and mercy of another: his Stasi surveillance captain, Gerd Wiesler. This is hardly a piece of information Dreyman simply adds to his knowledge bank, like an added curiosity. It utterly transforms everything he *knew, but didn’t truly know*; his life will never be the same and he dedicates his life’s work to the aim of thanking his benefactor.

It is a human analogy. How much more does the “dawning” realization that the sinner has been living, moving, and having their being at the grace of their Creator, borrowing his gifts with complete contempt, but is now offered forgiveness and newness of life, produce a radical transformation of what he or she thought they

at hand is the noetic effects of *sin*. Sin is *disintegrating*, at *total* war with logic and rationality. To demand a neat and tidy “logical” explanation of its effects on the human person, one easily articulated, that sits nicely in an organized system of thought, is to not understand the question.

60. Note the easy, familiar colloquialism: “*really* knew.” This is only unacceptable when Van Til does it.

knew? How much more does this turn what was once gross ingratitude into thankfulness (Rom. 1:21)?

It is fruitless and impossible to “silo” redemptive, saving, “Gospel” knowledge from other kinds of knowledge. The gospel *transforms* all other kinds of human knowledge; it puts all other human knowledge in its proper light; being placed, as Bavinck writes, “in proper relationship to God” brings about a “proper relationship to the world.” The whole human person is corrupted by sin and the whole person stands in need of renewal, including their minds (Rom. 12:2). Nothing the natural man brings with him remains unchanged. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis offers a customarily brilliant analogy:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.⁶¹

There are no locked closets in such a house, no autonomous collection of “known things” that God does

61. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001): 205.

not rummage through, alternatively discarding, cleaning, clarifying, restoring, and repurposing to his own ends. This is what the Reformed meant by *theologia naturalis* being “taken up” in *theologia supernaturalis* (Bavinck), why *theologia naturalis* was uniformly placed in the broader category of *theologia vera*: the light of God’s revelation in Christ, set down in Holy Scripture, is the light by which one sees and *knows* nature rightly. “In your light, we see light” (Ps. 36:9). “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). And the fact that C.S. Lewis arguably articulated this Reformed and VanTilian principle better than anyone else demonstrates its truly catholic heartbeat:

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

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