

# Herman Hoeksema's Critique of Cornelius Van Til's *Common Grace and the Gospel*

Herman Hoeksema

## Introduction

The following are fourteen editorials that were originally published in *The Standard Bearer* magazine between 1942 and 1943. They present responses and rebuttals to indictments and arguments levelled against Rev. Herman Hoeksema and his denial of common grace by Cornelius Van Til, Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. In these editorials, Hoeksema offers an insightful critique of the ideology and philosophy of Van Til. Although both theologians have long passed on to glory, the controversy over common grace versus particular grace, and over the "well-meant offer," still rages today in Reformed churches and within internet forums. Van Til wrote a lengthy article on "Common Grace," which has recently been republished as the first part of *Common Grace and the Gospel*, in which he sets out to give the theory of common grace a new basis or, rather, to demonstrate its ground in a new light. This new method of approach, this new light, is philosophical rather than theological; rationalistic rather than exegetical. While many who have purchased this newly published book think they have new arguments to support their belief in common grace, what has long been forgotten is that Herman Hoeksema acquired a copy of this original work on "Common Grace" and presented a refutation of the philosophical arguments made by Van Til (and consequently the same arguments that "Van Tillians" present today).

## Editorial #1: Introduction

(Source: *The Standard Bearer*, 1 Dec, 1942, vol. 19, no. 5, pp. 100-102)

"Common Grace" is the subject of one of two papers read before a gathering of the "Calvinistic Philosophy Club," and published in "The Proceedings of the Calvinistic Philosophy Club, 1941." The price of the whole book, let me say this for those of our readers that might be interested to buy the mimeographed pamphlet of about one hundred and thirty eight pages, is \$1.25. Order by Edward Heerema, Goffle Hill Road, Midland Park, N. J. The first of the two papers that constitute the contents of the "Proceedings" is by Edw. Heerema on the subject of "God in the Theology of Schleiermacher." It covers eighteen pages. The second paper is a discussion of the subject of common grace. It is in the latter that we are interested now. The author is Dr. C. Van Til, Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The paper covers no less than one hundred and ten mimeographed pages, closely typed on large sheets.

As soon as we read about the publication of Dr. Van Til's paper, we decided to let our readers know about its contents, and to discuss it in *The Standard Bearer*. And it is now several months ago that, through the courtesy of Van Til, I received a copy of the "Proceedings," which courtesy I hereby gratefully acknowledge. In the meantime, I read the book carefully, and also placed myself before the question as to the best method to be followed in the discussion of a paper of this kind. The tone of the book, even though it is controversial, is calm and quite dispassionate. In this respect the book leaves a much more favourable impression of the activities of the "Calvinistic Philosophic Club" than the articles by Van Halsema in *De Wachter* [*The Watchman*] would lead one to expect. Yet it is not without a certain misgiving that I finally decided to discuss Van Til's paper in *The Standard*

*Bearer.* The reason for this is not that the subject Van Til discusses is not a familiar one with our readers. The contrary is, of course, true. But the discussion is garbed in the language of philosophy, rather than in that of Reformed doctrine, or of theology, and I cannot expect that our readers generally are at all versed in that language. Since the paper was intended to be read before a philosophic club the author has not at all been careful to avoid philosophic terms and to express himself in the language of the people. As long as the author speaks about creation and providence, the probationary command, sin, grace, the Trinity, God's counsel, he speaks to all of us; but when he uses terms as structural reality, the universal, the metaphysical, the moment, the negative and positive instance, he talks, as far as the average reader of our paper is concerned "ins blauen hinein" [i.e., haphazardly]. And this difficulty increases in view of the fact that the author employs some of these terms with an unusual connotation, so that one wonders sometimes whether he understands the author's meaning.

But I will make an earnest attempt to give a correct appreciation and honest criticism of Van Til's paper in simple language.

Perhaps, I better introduce this discussion by giving the reader a general idea of the contents of the paper.

In an introductory paragraph Van Til writes: "To the perplexing problem of common grace we do not pretend to give an adequate answer. It is nothing essentially new that we bring. We merely seek to introduce the subject for discussion." This we must, of course, bear in mind in our evaluation of Van Til's work. The author then presents his material under four heads:

1. A Christian Philosophy of History
2. Dr. A. Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace
3. The Controversy on Common Grace
4. Suggestions for Further Discussion

As to the first part, Van Til would consider the common grace problem as a part of the aspect of the problem of the philosophy of history. For us, who probably do not understand what is meant by "philosophy of history," and who are, besides, a little shy of that term "philosophy," this may be interpreted to mean that Van Til does not intend to consider the problem from the narrow viewpoint of the question whether or not God is gracious to all men, but views it as a very comprehensive doctrine, dealing with God's relation to and dealings with men and all things in time. In this he agrees with us. We wrote in "The Reunion of the Christian Reformed and Protestant Reformed Churches" (p. 20):

The problem of so-called common grace concerns the question of God's attitude over against, and influence upon the whole of created things in their mutual connection, and their development in time, in connection and harmony with God's counsel in general, predestination with election and reprobation, the realization of God's eternal covenant, sin and grace, favor and wrath, nature and grace, creation and redemption, Adam and Christ, and it inquires into the position and calling of God's people in and over against the present world.

Perhaps, Van Til has something similar in mind when he would conceive of the problem of common grace as an aspect of the "philosophy of history." This, I take it, is an advantage. For though he and I may differ in our interpretation, we are, at least dealing with the same problem: a very comprehensive one.

The author then proceeds to explain what he understands by the philosophy of history. It deals with "facts." It makes an attempt to systematize the facts. It seeks to view the facts in the light of one pattern. Moreover, we are dealing with "history," and therefore with *time*, and hence, the facts are viewed under the aspect of "change." Non-Christian philosophy may question the existence of such a universal pattern, in the light of which all the detailed facts of history, with their development and change, must be interpreted: but for the Christian there can be no doubt about this.

For him the most basic fact of all facts is the existence of the triune God. About this God he has learned from Scripture. For the Christian the study of the philosophy of history is an effort to see life whole and see it through, but always in the light of the pattern shown him in the Mount. He cannot question, even when he cannot fully explain, the pattern of Scripture, in the light of which he regards the facts of history (p. 2).

I believe that I may interpret the meaning of all this to our readers in language which they have learned to use, by simply saying that a Christian attempts to understand all things in the light of God's counsel as revealed in the Scriptures.

Follows now a discussion of the difference between the attitude of the believer and the non-believer over against "facts."

According to Van Til there are no brute facts. And not only in their respective interpretation, but also in their mere description of facts, the Christian and non-Christian differ fundamentally. The unbeliever assumes an attitude of autonomy: he makes his own facts, even as he describes. They really become facts through his description of them. He creates his own world. But for the Christian, God and God only has definitory power in the ultimate sense of the word. The result is that the believer and unbeliever, as they interpret things, have nothing in common, they have a radically different conception of all things, even though they have all things in common objectively.

We conclude then that when both parties, the believer and the non-believer, are epistemologically self-conscious and as such engaged in the interpretative enterprise, they cannot be said to have any fact in common. On the other hand it must be asserted that they have every fact in common. Both deal with the same God and with the same universe created by God. Both are made in the image of God. In short, they have the metaphysical situation common. Objectively they have nothing in common (pp. 4, 5).

Here, I must confess, I do not feel as if I understand Van Til's meaning clearly, or rather, I feel that I do understand him, but I do not dare to be sure that what I feel he thinks is actually his full meaning. First of all, I do not quite understand why in this connection he speaks of "the metaphysical situation." Could not what Van Til means be expressed much better by the "physical" situation? But what does Van Til mean when he says that the believer and the non-believer have absolutely nothing in common subjectively? We have always stated the matter of the antithesis thus: that men have all things in common except grace. In other words, the antithesis is not natural, but spiritual, it is a spiritual-ethical antithesis. Sometimes, as we read Van Til's treatise, we felt that principally and fundamentally he means the same thing and that he only expresses this truth in different language. But when we read other passages in his paper, we felt that this does not correctly express his meaning.

In the first place, if that were his meaning, it would appear to me that the term "epistemological," which he employs frequently in this connection, is hardly to the point. Then, too, on another page he refers to a passage in my pamphlet "[The Christian and Culture](#)" as follows:

We cannot agree with the Reverend Herman Hoeksema when he says: "That the square of the hypotenuse of a rectangular triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of its sides is a mathematical truth, in the discovery and application of which man's ethical nature does not come to manifestation" ("The Christian and Culture," p. 170). Perhaps Hoeksema does not quite mean to have this statement stand without qualification. As it stands, and taken without qualification, it would compromise the Christian conception of history and therefore also of culture (p. 8).

I cannot understand this criticism of Van Til on the supposition that he, too, conceives of the antithesis as being ethical in nature, the less so, because from the context of the statement of mine which he quotes, it becomes perfectly evident that I draw the antithesis through along the whole line, and only maintain that it does not become equally clearly *manifest* in all branches of culture.

Literally I wrote: "And because of this the ethical contents of the products of modern culture are certainly corrupt. There are certain branches of culture that may be considered to lie at the periphery from this viewpoint. The spiritual-ethical attitude of man hardly comes to manifestation and expression in them. This is true, for instance, in the so-called *exact* sciences. That the square on the hypotenuse of a rectangular [triangle] is equal to the sum of the squares of its sides, is a mathematical truth, in the discovery and application of which man's ethical nature does not come to manifestation," etc.

It was, therefore, merely a question of more or less manifestation, not of the actual existence of the antithesis. And, lastly, if Van Til refers to a spiritual-ethical antithesis, I cannot grasp his real meaning in the following quotation from his treatise:

When I say the grass is green and my non-believing neighbor also says the grass is green we must act "as if" both meant the same thing. Interpretatively considered, my neighbor and I mean quite different matters (pp. 18, 19).

Now, it seems to me that if Van Til would have that statement to stand without qualification, he means much more than an ethical antithesis. To me, the believer and the unbeliever mean exactly the same thing when they say "the grass is green," and do not act on the basis of an "as if." Of course, both can interpret the statement, so that the one relates the green grass to a chance world, in which man appears as the creator of his own universe, the other relates it to God as the Creator. But as soon as they do, they do not merely say that the grass is green, but express much more. And then they differ, of course. But the mere and bare judgment "the grass is green," without further qualifications, certainly signifies the same thing for both of them.

But of this I shall have more to say when I discuss Van Til's "as if" theory. Now I merely meant to say that I hardly dare to assume that I understand him correctly, and he would do me a service if he would attempt to clarify the situation for me."

H. H.

## **Editorial #2: The "Moment": Kierkegaard and Barth**

(Source: *The Standard Bearer*; 15 Dec, 1942, vol. 19, no. 6, p. 126)

According to Van Til, the Christian and the non-Christian philosopher stand opposed to each other, not only in their conception and interpretation of facts, but also in their conception of "law": "abstract and impersonal" or "God-interpreted law." And back of these, they stand opposed to each other in regard to their conception of man: according to the one, man is autonomous, according to the other he is God-controlled. It is only the orthodox Christian thinker that maintains the true creation idea. In fact, only the Reformed thinker is able to offer a consistently Christian philosophy of history. The Roman Catholic is ready to compromise with the non-Christian philosopher in the domain of "Reason." And the Arminian holds that man is autonomous in the matter of salvation. The Reformed thinker only takes the truth of total depravity seriously, as well as the doctrine of sovereign grace.

All this, according to Van Til, is significant for the philosophy of history. For the philosophy of history inquires into the meaning of history, it asks (and here Van Til borrows a phrase of Kierkegaard) “how the Moment is to have significance.”

I confess that I was surprised to find that Van Til borrows the term “Moment” from Kierkegaard and from Barthian theology, not only here (p. 5), where he admittedly does so, but frequently throughout the book. In fact, one cannot understand Van Til’s conception of common grace, unless he knows the denotation of this term as Van Til employs it. Surprised, I say, I was to find that he employs this term so freely, considering the fact that the writer is so thoroughly opposed to everything Barthian that to be branded a Barthian, or even to express doubt as to the justice of some of the criticism of his views, is to be tainted with heresy of a dangerous sort. At the very risk of being put to bed with this dangerous heretic once more, I frankly confess, that although I cannot agree with Barth, I can neither find sufficient reasons for the severe and thoroughly condemnatory criticism of him in some circles. And I have studied Barth, too, I think.

But how can Van Til, then, employ so thoroughly and characteristically Barthian a term? He certainly doesn’t give it the same contents, and that is confusing. In Kierkegaard, the term “moment” denotes not “history,” nor part of history, nor even a section of time, but “an atom of eternity,” figuratively speaking: the point at which the perpendicular line from above dissects the horizontal line of our existence. And Barth borrowed the term from Kierkegaard.

According to Barth, the “moment” is the point at which time and eternity touch. It is closely related to his conception of “the two ages” or *Zeiten*, the *aion touton* and the *aion mellon* of Scripture, which, however, receive a new meaning in Barth. For the *aion touton* “this age,” is our present life in a qualitative sense, the world of time through which we pass with all things; the *aion mellon*, “the age to come,” is the eternal order, the kingdom of God, qualitatively different from the order of time, and breaking in upon our world, always present, yet ever breaking in upon our world. And they stand in no relation to each other, for time is no eternity. And we are “between the times,” “zwischen den Zeiten” (*Römerbrief*, p. 483). And very closely related to this notion of the two *Zeiten* is Barth’s conception of the “moment,” *das Augenblick*, *das ewige Augenblick*, which crosses our horizontal series of time-moments. The moment, therefore, in Barthian terminology, is the point of contact between eternity and time (*Römerbrief*, p. 483).

Now, it is evident that Van Til, though he uses this term, gives it an entirely different content. By it he does not mean a “moment” or “Augenblick” at all. Perhaps, we can discover, by comparing different passages in his book, just what he means by it. We shall have to refer to this again. In the meantime, lest we run the danger of misconstruing his meaning (and we certainly do not mean to do this), he could do us a real service if he would himself define this term as he employs it.

H. H.

### **Editorial #3: The “Moment,” the Philosophy of History and Common Grace**

(Source: *The Standard Bearer*, 1 Jan, 1943, vol. 19, no. 7, pp. 148-150)

The true conception of the “moment,” against the background of the counsel of God, makes it possible to give real meaning to history, according to Van Til. For, according to this view, it is God’s meaning that is in all things. They do not receive their meaning from man, for “God’s idea of Himself is *in re*,” and when man deals with “the phenomenal world” he deals with God (p. 8).

On this basis we can explain and maintain the reality of the “positive and negative instance,” good and evil, and especially moral good and moral evil. They are historically real and have meaning, exactly because they are viewed on the background of God’s eternal counsel, and because God controls all things.

It is because the reprobate is reprobated that his sin must be given and can be given for his lost estate. It is because the elect are elected that salvation is by faith alone. It is because of the ultimately “unconditional” in God that the “conditional” of history has meaning (p. 10).

In the light of God’s sovereign counsel we can also maintain the true correlativeness between the “positive and negative instance,” between good and evil. For God has freely determined that the evil should serve to bring out the good by contrast.

The probationary command in paradise was based on this principle. Those who were elected to eternal life, whose destiny was in God’s plan fully determined upon as being in the direction of the good, were yet threatened with eternal misery. Their moral act as a conditional act required the inclusion of this “threat.” On the other hand, those who were not elected to eternal life, whose destiny was in God’s plan fully determined upon as being in the direction of evil, were yet placed before the conditional promise of eternal life. Their act of disobedience, to be real disobedience, required their confrontation with moral glory as the reward of moral virtue. The “threat” of eternal punishment to the elect and the “promise of eternal life” to the non-elect stand on the same epistemological level (p. 10).

On this attitude of God and His dealing with “the elect” and “the reprobate” in Adam, Van Til has more to say in a later connection. Before we call attention to this, however, it is necessary to take cognizance of the distinction he introduces into the “Moment.” We will quote him literally. In order to understand his meaning the reader may take for granted that by “moment” Van Til means all the events of history from the beginning to the consummation. He writes:

But we have yet to reach the climax of our difficulties with respect to the possible significance of the Moment (history, H. H.). The Moment (history, H. H.) is really a series of Moments (unrelated histories? H. H.). The Moment must be subdivided into *Moment A* and *Moment B*. Hence the Christian correlativity-idea (the idea that good and evil are so related according to God’s counsel, that evil, by contrast, serves to bring out the good, H. H.) must be carried into this Moment-by-Moment relationship. Indeed, the correlativity-idea itself would be incomplete without this Moment-by-Moment relationship. And without the completion of the correlativity-idea the Moment (history, H. H.) would have no significance. Moment A without Moment B (history in the state of original righteousness in paradise, and history under sin and grace? H. H.) is incomplete. The *general* Moment (history, H. H.) includes both. The question then is as to the Moment-by-Moment relationship (i.e. the relationship between Adam, the probationary command, the fall, on the one hand; Christ, election and reprobation, salvation and damnation, on the other hand? H. H.) And on this point there are, as is to be expected, only two answers. The Christian answer is based on the presupposition of the Christian necessity concept. God has determined by his free counsel on the eternal destiny both *in malum* (*malum*, of course, H. H.) and *in bonam partem* of all his moral creatures (i.e. predestination unto eternal evil and eternal good, H. H.). Apparently without differentiation he places all these moral creatures before the probationary command. We say *apparently* without differentiation because it was not *really* without differentiation. More Moments (one could almost use the term “dispensations” here, H. H.) were to follow the probationary Moment (history, dispensation, H. H.). In particular one Moment, the Moment of the redemptive and reprobationary (is this a correct term? H. H.) work of Christ was to follow the probationary Moment. And the later Moment was to be related to the earlier Moment. Both were means to the final end as planned by God. Both Moments operate against the background of the basic universal of the counsel of God. They have significance in relationship to one another because of this general background of the counsel of God. Without this general background they would be utterly isolated and therefore have no meaning. The moral differential of the probationary command required the *later* Moment, a later Moment also operative before the counsel of God. Believers have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world that

they should be holy and without blame before Him in love. The good works of believers were predestined from before the Moment (history, H. H.) as such, and require not one but *two* important *Moments* for their realization. They are good works based on the historical rejection as well as on the historical acceptance of sin. The first Moment speaks of the historical acceptance; the second Moment of the historical rejection of evil. The one is incomplete without the other. In order to clarify the nature of the connecting link between Moment A and Moment B as subsidiary to the Moment in general we must proceed to one more step of subdivision. Moment a, and Moment b, are representative of the ordinary moments (here the term has a new meaning, it seems to me, H. H.) of daily human experience. Just as we subdivide the Moment that is history as such, (here Van Til identifies *the* Moment with history, H. H.) into Moment A and Moment B, so now we must subdivide Moment A and Moment B into moments a, b, c ... of ordinary human experience. If we are to deal with the “universal” or law of history we need all these distinctions (pp. 11, 12).

As I have stated before, all this is not exactly lucid, the difficulty being that Van Til’s contents or denotation of the term “Moment” appears to be rather changeable. But the general purpose of this part of his reasoning is to show the meaning of the Christian correlativity idea. He himself states this as follows:

The individual (Adam, Christ, H. H.) can influence the nature of the universal (the human nature, H. H.) and the universal (the human nature, H. H.) can influence the nature of the individual (all men, the elect, the reprobate, H. H.).

The significance of all this for “common grace” as conceived by Van Til becomes evident when he applies this philosophy to God’s counsel in relation to actual history as revealed to us in the Scriptures: to Adam in the state of righteousness, the probationary command, all men in their relation to Adam, and in him to God’s command, God’s attitude to Adam, and to all men in him, before the fall and after the fall, Christ and redemption in Him, election and reprobation, the general “offer” of salvation, and God’s favourable attitude to all men. For it is to these that Van Til applies his basic principles of the philosophy of history as laid down in the first part of his work. One would expect that, having started from a broad basis, and having recognized the fact that the question of “common grace” really concerns the problem of history in relation to God in all its applications, Van Til would also build a broad superstructure, and be concerned with the problem of common grace in its comprehensive aspect. However, this is not the case. When he applies his principles of the philosophy of history developed in the first part his book to the question of “common grace,” he after all concerns himself only with the narrow question whether there is a common attitude of God to the elect and reprobate in this world, the question of “the Three Points.” And he argues that before the fall all men, elect and reprobate, in Adam were the objects of a common favor of God; that after the fall all men became the object of a common wrath, even so that God “hated all men,” elect and reprobate; and that, therefore, there must be a certain “commonness” in God’s attitude of favor to elect and reprobate to the end of time.

We are not now criticizing his view. We are trying to show how Van Til applies his philosophy of the “Moment” to the question of common grace. As far as I can see, he does not place himself before the question of the value and significance of “the Moment” with respect to the final fruit and consummation of all things. He deals especially with Adam and all men in him. Let me quote a few more passages in this connection.

The Christian idea of correlativity in the Moment finds concrete historical expression in the idea of representation. It was because of the true correlativity in the Moment that Adam could represent the whole human race. He, as an individual, could change the nature of the universal called human nature. This human nature was created good. Yet as such it was amendable to change by the action of the individual. It was not that abstract eternally unchangeable something which, on the principles of Parmenides, it should be. If it had been such, no historical action of any individual could have modified it. Man was perfect, but yet able to sin when first he came from the hand of God. On the other hand, human nature was not amendable to change by the action of *every* individual. *If it had been it would have been no universal at all*, and would therefore have had no influence on individuals ... Scripture speaks of Adam, the first historical individual, who could change the universal of human nature in

such a decisive manner that all later historical individuals were born with an *evil character* for which they are yet held immediately responsible. All historical individuals who came after Adam are guilty as well as polluted before God ... This representative action would be impossible on any basis but that of correlativity between the historical universal and the historical particular as based on the counsel of God back of history. There was a true universality into which the first individual was born and this true universality was amendable to change by the first individual because he was the representative individual (p. 13).

Further:

It is only on a Christian basis then that progress is possible. The action of the second Adam was meant, in the counsel of God, to follow the action of the first Adam. There was first a good human nature. Then through the action of the first Adam this good human nature became a sinful human nature. Through the act of the second Adam this became, in the case the elect, a redeemed human nature ... No ordinary historical individual, a, b, c, could change the human nature made sinful by the first representative individual ... If the Moment as such was to have significance, Moment B, in which the divine representative Individual changed sinful human nature, had to follow Moment A, in which the human representative changed the original good human nature (p. 14).

On page 62:

When history is finished God no longer has any kind of favor toward the reprobate. They still exist and God has pleasure in their existence, but not in the fact of their bare existence. God has pleasure in their historically *defeated* existence ... Therefore, God no longer in any sense *classifies* him in a generality with the elect. It was only at an earlier date before the consummation of their wicked striving was made complete that God even *in a sense* classified him with the elect ... When God first spoke to Adam he did so as the representative of all men ... When he fell all men *became* sinners; they became in Adam the objects of God's wrath ... It was by the same negative act to the same "offer" that *all* men lost the favor of God and became the objects of the "common" wrath of God ... The elect of God are always the objects of favor in the ultimate sense ... Then the elect became sinners in Adam and as sinners the object of God's wrath ... Thus the elect, together with the reprobate are objects of God's wrath.

Again and again Van Til refers to the "commonness" between the elect and the reprobate that existed in paradise. According to him, both the elect and reprobate performed good action in Adam up to a certain point:

There was not only (a) commonness of mere existence. Therefore (b) commonness of official capacity. There was (c) commonness of good action in official capacity. Thus there was *genuine* commonness in good up to a certain point between believers and non-believers. There was a genuine commonness in evil up to a point after the fall. There is no reason why there should not be genuine commonness up to a point throughout the course of history as long as the consummation of wickedness has not been reached (p. 64).

One more quotation:

We need not hesitate to affirm then that in the beginning God loved mankind in general. That was before mankind had sinned against God. A little later God hated mankind in general ... So the elect and reprobate are under a *common wrath* (p. 95).

This may be considered to give a fair idea of the way Van Til applies his conception of the Moment and correlativity in the Moment to the problem of common grace. Next time, the Lord willing, we will offer our criticism on this point.

H. H.

## Editorial #4: The “Moment” and God's Counsel

(Source: *The Standard Bearer*; 15 Jan, 1943, vol. 19, no. 8, pp. 172-174)

Van Til's philosophy of the “Moment” is really the basic and essential part of his philosophy of history in as far as he makes an attempt to find room for the theory of common grace. His conception of common grace is not different from the current view of this theory as, for instance, adopted by the Christian Reformed Churches in the “Three Points.” In this respect, it is literally true what he wrote in the introductory paragraph of his book:

To the perplexing problem of common grace we do not pretend to give an adequate answer. It is nothing essentially new that we bring.

The difference between his work and what has been offered before on this subject must be found in the method of approach. He does make an attempt to demonstrate the truth of “common grace” in a new way. That the conclusions of “common grace” are, in the main, correct, he never seriously doubts. But he sets out to give the theory a new basis, or rather, to demonstrate its ground in a new light. This new method of approach, this new light, is philosophical rather than theological; rationalistic rather than exegetical. Never does Van Til argue from Scripture. Even that which he presents as the most fundamental principle of his philosophy, the most basic starting-point, “the ontological trinity,” remains rather remotely in the background throughout the book. But in as far as he develops his history of philosophy in order to demonstrate the plausibility of “common grace,” his conception of the “Moment” occupies a very important place in that philosophy. Hence, we will take time out now to criticize that conception.

Van Til agrees that we can properly understand the meaning of history only if we view the “Moment,” all things in time, on the background of God's eternal counsel. But the more I tried to get into his way of thinking and studied his philosophy of history, the more I became convinced that he fails exactly on this most important point. To me, to view all things on the background of the eternal counsel of God, means that every “moment” is eternally in God's eternal purpose, and is, in that eternal purpose, related as means to an end to every other “moment,” while all the “moments” of history are related as means to the ultimate end: the highest revelation of the glory of God in the realization of His eternal covenant in Christ Jesus, the firstborn of every creature *and* the first begotten from the dead. For “known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” [Acts 15:18].

Before the mind of God are all things as they will be in the new heavens and the new earth, but also all the “moments” of history as by His infinite wisdom He has designed them in relation to the end, and they are thus before His divine mind, and in His sovereign conception *eternally*. Even time itself, and all that develops in time, is eternally in Him. With Him there is “no variableness neither shadow of turning.” Creation and Paradise, Adam and the state of righteousness, sin and grace, Christ, the cross, the resurrection, the exaltation, the elect and the reprobate, all things in their beginning, their development, and their final consummation, are before His divine mind, in His eternal good pleasure, in their proper relationship to one another from everlasting to everlasting. The elect in their glory, and all that must lead to their glory; the reprobate in their utter desolation, and all that must lead to their damnation—all have their place in that good pleasure of the Most High unchangeably and forever.

How otherwise could the Scriptures say that “whom he did foreknow he also did predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinated them he also *called*; and whom he called, them he also *justified*; and whom he justified, them he also *glorified*”? Or how could it possibly be said that “He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel”? (Num. 23:21). And this also implies that it is not the “moment” that determines the attitude of God, either to the elect or to the reprobate, but that it is His own good pleasure that sovereignly determines His attitude to the creature in the “moment.”

This to me is the meaning of viewing the “Moment,” and all “Moments” and “moments” against the background of God’s eternal counsel.

Had Van Til really done this, he could not have said that God assumed an attitude of grace toward the elect and reprobate in Moment A, in Adam in the state of righteousness; nor that also the reprobate in that Moment were good, and performed good action in Adam (“a commonness of good action in official capacity”; and a “commonness in good up to a certain point between believers and non-believers”); nor that after the fall God hated both the elect and the reprobate; and that now, because the end is not yet, and the elect, are not yet perfect, neither the reprobate utterly damned, there is still a commonness in God’s attitude of grace toward both. For, in what Van Til calls Moment A, the elect and reprobate do not as yet exist historically as such, they were not yet born, neither had they done good or evil (Rom. 9:11). Hence, historically there could be no common attitude of God to the elect and the reprobate. Nor did they perform any good works, unless Van Til means to imply that the good works of Adam before the fall were imputed to the elect and to the reprobate, to all men. And if Van Til really wants to view Moment A, the state of righteousness in the light of, or on the background of the counsel of God, then he will have to see Adam, the father, the head, the root of the human race, as the first elect in Christ, who could be placed before the antithesis, disobey and fall into sin, yet fall on Christ and be saved. And then Van Til will have to view all God’s dealings with Adam in Paradise in the light of that counsel.

The state of righteousness and the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the so-called “probationary command,” and the fall of the first man Adam must be viewed in that light; they all belong to God’s dealing with Adam according to His eternal good pleasure. It is not clear from Van Til’s book just what place he gives to sin in the light of the counsel of God, and in the dealings of God with Adam. He speaks of Moment A, the state of righteousness and of Moment B, the state of things after the fall and in Christ. But, viewed in the light of God’s counsel, what is the relation between the two Moments? How do we advance from Moment A to Moment B? The advance is made through the fall and disobedience of the first man Adam. But how about that “moment” of sin, when viewed on the background of the counsel of God? Shall we say that God willed Adam to fall? Or shall we prefer the statement that God permitted Adam to fall? I far prefer the former statement, for God is the *Lord*. But whether you prefer the one or the other, the point is that the fall of Adam is eternally in the counsel of God as a “moment” fixed by His sovereign decree. Well, then, when God realizes this eternal “moment” of His counsel in time, and so deals with Adam that he falls into sin and death (a statement to which even the weakest Reformed man will not object), did He so deal with Adam in His love or in His hatred of Adam? Was it eternal love that motivated God in placing the tree of knowledge of good and evil, in issuing the “probationary” command, in arranging for the temptation through the serpent, or was it hatred? Van Til proposes that God loved Adam before the fall, and that He hated him after the fall. How did God consider Adam in His own dealings with Adam that led up to the fall?

If we could view all things in the light of God’s counsel this question must needs arise and ought to be answered. Now, my answer, and I am persuaded that it is the answer of Scripture, is that God loved Adam with an eternal love, not as Adam but as the first elect in Christ; that, moreover, there was an entire Church, a multitude of elect in Adam’s loins; and that all God’s dealings with Adam were absolutely motivated by that sovereign love of God to Adam and to the Church that was in his loins in Christ. He loved him as elect in the state of righteousness. He loved him when He so controlled all things that he fell, and He loved him as an elect after he had fallen. For, according to the election of grace, Adam fell upon Christ. There was, then, never a moment in Adam’s existence that God hated Adam.

And the same is true of the elect. Indeed, when one views Adam in Paradise in the state of righteousness, in the light of, on the background of God’s eternal counsel, he stands there, too, as the father of all the elect, as the progenitor of the Church according to the flesh. The Church was in his loins. And God loved Adam as the progenitor of that Church, no doubt but He also loved that elect Church in him. Even Christ, according to the flesh, was in Adam’s loins, for Christ is “the son of ... Adam ... the son of God” [Luke 3:38].

Now when God caused that Church in Adam to fall into sin and death, did He do so in His love or in His hatred? In His eternal love. And when that Church in Adam had fallen, did He hate or love that Church. And did He deal with that Church, even immediately after the fall, in His love or in His hate? In His love. For He had provided some better thing for that Church than the first paradise. He had prepared for them a city. He loved the elect in Adam before the fall, He loved them in the fall, He loved them after the fall. And mark you well, this is not an abstraction, as if it were thus only in God's eternal counsel, but this eternal love was in every "moment" of God's dealings with His Church. You may object that they, nevertheless, became "children of wrath, even as the others" [Eph. 2:3]. We have no objection to this. God's holy wrath is kindled against all sin, in the elect and in the reprobate. But do not forget, that if you view this wrath of God against the elect's sin on the background of God's eternal counsel, it is a wrath of love, a wrath that is borne to the end in their stead by Christ Jesus their Lord.

And how about the reprobate? They also were in Adam's loins. And, if we are to believe Van Til, God loved the reprobate in Adam in the state of righteousness, and after the fall He hates them. But when he states this, he surely does not look at the "Moment" on the background of God's counsel. Fact is, that he considers God's attitude to the reprobate entirely in the light of the "Moment." Van Til emphasizes that, in order to find a solution of the problem of "common grace" we must lay greater emphasis than heretofore on the element of time. It is my opinion that he does this to such an extent that he carries the element of time into God's counsel itself, and that he lets that element control and determine the attitude of God to the elect and to the reprobate. But in this way, he very really presents God Himself as changeable. God changes His attitude as the "Moment" changes. I am quite sure, of course, that he is far from intending to teach that there is variableness in God. But in his presentation of the "Moment," he, nevertheless, makes God change His attitude repeatedly. Yet, this is quite contrary to the Word of God. Fact is, that God hated the reprobate in the loins of Adam in the state of righteousness, in the event of the fall, and after the fall. And all His dealings with them are motivated by that sovereign hatred of His good pleasure. "For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth; it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" [Rom. 9:11-13]. And it is not difficult to see, when you view history on the background of the counsel of God, that this sovereign hatred of God's good pleasure, is the motive of all God's dealings with Adam in the state of righteousness and after, that is, as far as the reprobate are concerned. For it were better for them that they had never been born [Matt. 26:24]!

H. H.

## **Editorial #5: The "Moment," the Meaning of History and Paradox**

(Source: *The Standard Bearer*, 1 Feb, 1943, vol. 19, no. 9, pp. 196-198)

Before we pass to the discussion of other elements of the philosophy of Dr. Van Til, we must still make one remark concerning his conception of what he calls "the Moment." We have a question here. Van Til speaks of Moment A and Moment B, both with respect to the attitude of God to the believers and non-believers, or rather, to elect and reprobate, and with respect to the relation between these in the world. But as far as I have been able to find out, he does not express himself at all with regard to the real meaning of history, particularly of Moment B, and of the relation of the latter to the kingdom of heaven in the new creation.

Yet this question concerns the very heart of the common grace problem. To be sure, common grace postulates an attitude of grace on the part of God to the righteous and wicked alike in this world; it teaches that this common grace so operates that sin is restrained and the fallen human nature is improved. But all this is developed only in order to make room for a relatively good culture in the sinful world. Thus it is with Dr. Kuyper. He sees a good world, in spite of the fact that Scripture teaches us that it is wholly corrupt ethically, and that it bears the curse of

God and is subject to vanity. He did not simply find a doctrine of common grace in Scripture and develop it. On the contrary, he went to Scripture to find out whether it would support his conception of a good world and noble sinner. He surely did not develop his theory of common grace in order to find a “well-meaning offer on the part of God to all men” as was adopted in the First Point of 1924. No, but he approached the matter from the viewpoint of the question: how can one who holds the Reformed truth of total depravity explain the goodness of the fallen man, and the marvel of culture? And his answer is: “common grace.” God established a covenant of friendship with the wicked world as such. In that covenant He assumes an attitude of grace and mercy to all, and restrains the operation of the curse, of sin and death, in order that fallen man may become co-worker with God in the development of this world and all its hidden wonders, and in order that thus God’s original creation ordinance may be realized.

That this is, indeed, the heart of the question in Kuyper’s *Gemeene Gratie* [i.e., *Common Grace*], and that he approaches the whole problem with this in mind, would not be difficult to prove. Kuyper can find no room for history without common grace. According to him, there is not even a providential preservation and government of the world conceivable without common grace. And through common grace there is positive development and progress of the world according to the original purpose of creation. This purpose Satan meant to frustrate. It was his purpose to prevent the revelation of God’s glory through the development of all the wonders of creation and for this purpose, he tempts man to fall away from God. But to carry out His original creation ordinance, and thus reach the glory of His name, God enters into a covenant of common grace with the sinner and all men, and thus makes man His co-worker for the development of the powers of creation. Apart from the salvation of the Church, and the ultimate new creation, there is an organic development of this world with positive fruit. And this positive fruit of “common grace” has significance and value even for the eternal kingdom of heaven, it is carried into the New Jerusalem. It is thus that Dr. Kuyper explains Revelation 21:24: “and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it.” This “glory and honor” refers, according to him, to the culture of the world in this present age. He writes:

Nothing needs be excluded from this. It refers to their development in the sphere of their family life and social life, of their political institutions and their jurisprudence, of science and art, of heroism and tact, of commerce and industry, in short of all that which in its connection and unity constitutes the glory of a nation, and which gives it a place among the civilized nations. And since, as the expression in a single period is meant, but this glory and honor here appears as the property of *the nations*, and that, too, in their entire course of history, we only think here of the continuous communal development attained or still to be attained by our entire human life in the history of the nations. And of this fruit, which is necessarily nothing else than the fruit of common grace, it is said, that this fruit is not simply submerged and destroyed in the general world-conflagration, but that it will have abiding significance for the New Jerusalem, i.e. for the new earth, for this glory and honor that shall then be attained by the human race is being carried into the new Jerusalem. (*Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1, pp. 460-461).

Now we understand that Van Til does not agree with this, and this we appreciate. Sometimes we get the impression from what he writes, that he fundamentally agrees with us in his conception of history. Thus he writes on p. 41 of his book:

We have had occasion to criticise some aspect of the criticism of Kuyper given by Danhof and Hoeksema. We do not hesitate to express also our appreciation of other aspects of this criticism. Danhof and Hoeksema have called our attention to the fact that to an extent Kuyper has to use our own terms, though abstractly rather than concretely. Kuyper himself, as his critics admit, has taught us to think concretely. He has taught us to regard all the facts in the light of the comprehensive counsel of God. But if we are to thus think concretely, it is in order to say with Danhof and Hoeksema that there is no such thing as an independent creation plan. Nor can we speak of the metaphysical situation as on the verge of stopping short when sin came into the world. Again, we cannot, as Kuyper sometimes does, speak of redemption particularistically. Nor, finally, can we speak of a “common judgment” and a “territory-between” when we speak of believer and unbelievers.

It is evident, then, that Van Til does not believe that by common grace God carries out an original creation plan. That is not the meaning of history, of Moment B. But the question remains: how does he explain the history of this present time? That the righteous and the wicked have all things in common, is evident. That there is such a thing as “worldly culture” is also plain. But what is its meaning? How does Van Til evaluate it? Does it actually accomplish something? Is there positive fruit of the “culture” of the ungodly? And what is the significance of the present world with a view to the world to come, the kingdom of heaven in the new creation? It is important that Van Til gives us an answer to these questions. For, closely connected with the answer to these questions is the answer to another: just what is the position and calling of the believer in the present world?

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We pass on now to another element that occupies an important place in Van Til’s philosophy, the element of the “paradox.” Let us quote him on this subject:

Our position is naturally charged with being self-contradictory. The full bucket difficulty expresses the nature of that charge. It might seem at first glance, as though we were willing, with the dialectical theologians, to accept the really contradictory. We urge that unless we may hold to the presupposition of the self-contained ontological trinity, human rationality itself is a mirage. But to hold to this position requires us to say, that while we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory, we embrace with passion the idea of the *apparently* contradictory. It is through the latter alone that we can reject the former. If it is the self-contained ontological trinity that we need for the rationality of our interpretation of life, it is this same ontological trinity that requires us to hold to the apparently contradictory. This ontological trinity is, as the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards puts it, “incomprehensible.” God dwells in the light that no man can approach unto. This holds of His rationality as well as of His being, inasmuch as His being and His self-consciousness are identical. It follows that in everything we deal with, we are, in the last analysis, dealing with this infinite God, this God who hideth Himself, this mysterious God. In everything that we handle we deal finally with the incomprehensible God. Everything that we handle depends for what it is upon the counsel of the infinitely inexhaustible God. At every point we run into mystery. All our ingenuity will not aid us in seeking to avoid this mystery. All our ingenuity cannot exhaust the humanly inexhaustible rationality of God. To seek to present the Christian position as rationally explicable in the sense of being comprehensible to the mind of man is to defeat our own purpose. To do so we must adopt the standard of reasoning of our opponent, and when we have adopted the standard of reasoning of our opponent, we must rest content with the idea of a finite God. No Christian can answer the full bucket difficulty in such a way as to satisfy the demands of a non-Christian epistemology. We can and must maintain that the Christian position is the only position that does not destroy reason itself. But this is not to say that the relation between human responsibility and the counsel of God is not *apparently* contradictory. That all things in history are determined by God must always *seem*, at first sight, to contradict the genuineness of my choice. That the elect are certainly saved for eternity must always *seem* to make the threat of eternal punishment unreal with respect to them. That the reprobate are certainly to be lost must always *seem* to make the presentation of eternal life unreal with respect to them (p. 16).

We shall have more to quote from Van Til’s book on this point, especially to make clear how he applies this to the theory of common grace. But this must wait till the next issue.

H. H.

## Editorial #6: Paradox and Apparent Contradictions

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*, 15 Feb, 1943, vol. 19, no. 10, pp. 220-222)

We cannot possibly call attention to every detail in Van Til's work for I am afraid that I would weary the attention of our readers too much by doing so. As an illustration of Van Til's meaning when he speaks of the "paradox," and his application to the matter of "common grace," therefore, I will make just one other quotation. The writer is discussing Point I of 1924, and particularly Dr. Schilder's appraisal of its meaning over against the Rev. Zwier. He writes:

The point of logic raised by Schilder is of a similar nature. Zwier replies that something more should have been said on the subject. Again, we agree. It is one thing to say that our Scripture exegesis must seek to be consistent. We must, as far as we are able, interpret according to the analogy of faith. It is another thing to say that our interpretation must accord with logic as that is generally taken. If the second statement is not to be out of accord with the first it must refer to a genuinely Christian-theistic conception of logic. It may perhaps be said that much of the abstract reasoning of Hoeksema comes from his failure to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian logic. We do not mean, of course, that the rules of the syllogism are different for Christians and non-Christians. Hoeksema refers to the idea of insanity, saying that sin has not made us insane. We may agree if he means merely that the unbeliever can follow the technical processes of intellectual procedure as well or often better than the believer. But when he says or assumes that God's revelation in Scripture may be expected to reveal nothing which will be apparently self-contradictory we demur. He attempts to harmonize the revealed will and secret will of God, prayer and the counsel of God, etc. His efforts on this score would not be accepted by unbelievers. He cannot solve the full bucket difficulty, a difficulty which, they think, lies at the heart of the Christian religion. To them the whole idea of a God who is self-sufficient and all-glorious precludes the idea of anything taking place in history that should glorify Him. To say that no one resists the will of God, not even the murderer is for them, to say that we simply believe in fatalism. Have we then the right and courage to say that Christianity does not contradict the laws of logic? We do by pointing out that it is God, the self-sufficient God, in Whom is no darkness at all, Who made us His creatures. Then it appears natural that there should be in all that pertains to our relation to God (and what does not?) an element of mystery. As finite creatures we deal in all our contact with an infinite and inexhaustible God ... On the other hand, the Christian doctrine of God is the presupposition of the possibility of true logical procedure. The rules of formal logic must be followed in all our attempts at systematic exposition of God's revelation whether general or special. But the syllogistic process must be followed in frank subordination to the notion of a self-sufficient God. We must here truly face the Absolute. We must think His thoughts after Him. We must think analogically rather than univocally. To reason as though we can remove all the "logical difficulties" which will naturally appear to be contained in the Christian system of truth is to say, in effect, that on the question of logic the believer and the non-believer occupy neutral territory and to assign to the unbeliever a competence he does not in reality possess (pp. 59-60).

It is evident that in application to the first point of 1924, this means that, when Scripture teaches that God hates the reprobate, both as reprobate and as historically existing wicked, this does not preclude the possibility that the same Scripture also teaches that He loves them, both as reprobate and as wicked, and is gracious to them. The first point is defended by an appeal to the Paradox. The same application is made, of course, with regard to the second and third Points of 1924. The fact that the Bible teaches that the wicked is wholly corrupt, not only in his nature, but also in his ways, does not preclude to the doctrine that he also does good in this world. It is admitted that these things are *apparently* contradictory. It is denied, however, that they are *really* contradictory. The apparently contradictory is a *mystery*. And all this is maintained by an appeal to the self-sufficiency and absoluteness of God.

Now on this entire philosophy of the "paradox" I wish to make the following remarks:

1. That it is still not quite clear to me what the author means by his distinction between Christian and non-Christian logic. He appears to admit that the formal rules of logic are the same for the believer and the unbeliever. But if this is fully admitted, it seems to me that it is admitted also that there is no difference between the *logic* of the believer and the *logic* of the unbeliever, any more than there can be any difference between the formal rules of *arithmetic* for the Christian and the non-Christian. For what is logic otherwise than a system of formal rules of reasoning? There may be difference in fundamental premises from which the Christian and the non-Christian start their reasoning process; and there is, of course. The former starts from revelation, the latter refuses to take his starting point in the Word of God. But this does not affect their formal logic. There may be a difference in the application and appraisal of the value and power of logic. The Christian admits, of course, that with his finite mind he can neither reach out for, nor deny the Infinite; the rationalistic unbeliever refuses to admit this. But even so, the formal processes of logic remain the same for both. Also in this respect they have what Van Til calls “the metaphysical situation” in common. The distinction made by Van Til between Christian and non-Christian *logic* to me appears erroneous.

2. To formal logic certainly belongs the law of contradictions, and I maintain that this law holds for the Christian as well as the non-Christian, and, what is more, that even Van Til can never escape its binding force. It is my conviction that for anyone to state that he believes both sides of a contradiction, apparently or real, is itself a contradiction. He that makes the statement simply contradicts himself. What is a contradiction? It is a statement that is the direct opposite of another statement, so directly the opposite that it denies the truth of the latter statement. And what is the formal rule of logic that applies here? This: that a thing cannot *be* and *not be* at the same time, or a thing must either *be* or *not be*; and that the same attribute cannot be denied and affirmed of the same subject at the same time. Now it ought to be as plain as the sun in the heavens that no one can possibly escape the stringent necessity of this formal law of logic. If I maintain the truth of one of two contradictory statements, *I thereby have already stated that I have denied the truth of the other statement*. A thing may have two quite different attributes, of course. The statement: *this paper is white*, does not contradict the statement *this paper is black*, for the simple reason that it may be white on one side, black on the other. But after I have stated: *This paper is white*, I cannot say and believe the statement: *this paper is not white*, for the simple reason that in my first statement I did already state: this paper is *not not-white*. Now, Van Til admits this. He emphasizes that he does not believe in the *really* contradictory. But he claims that he can maintain the *apparently* contradictory. Let us see whether this be true, i.e. whether any normal mind, Christian or non-Christian, can really accept the *apparently* contradictory. What is meant by *apparently* contradictory? This: that two propositions *appear* contradictory to me, although I know that they are not. As far as I can see, they are absolutely contradictory, so that the one precludes the truth of the other, and the other precludes the truth of the one. I know that this paper is not: *white and not-white*. Yet, so it appears to me. What, then, is my only conclusion? The contradiction? Do I, in that case, say categorically: this paper is both white and not white? Not at all! I know that this statement cannot be truly made. I am convinced, that whatever may be the truth about the colour of that paper, the statement that it is both white and not-white *is certainly not true!* What then is the result? That I can say absolutely nothing about the colour of that paper! And so it is evident, that no normal mind can possibly entertain two contradictory propositions.

3. This does not at all deny the *mystery*. I very well believe the mystery on the basis of revelation. I know that the Infinite is forever beyond the reach of the finite, and that if we are to *know* the Infinite, it can only be by revelation, and, moreover, that this revelation of the Infinite must necessarily involve mysteries for my finite mind. The scriptural notion of mystery is that of something which cannot be known by man at all, except by revelation. And even though it is known by faith, it may be too high, too deep for me to comprehend and fathom. But a mystery is no contradiction, nor an apparent contradiction. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a mystery, but it is no doctrine that involves logical contradictions. If it did, we could not have a doctrine of the Trinity at all. That God is the absolutely self-sufficient Being, and that He, nevertheless, purposes to be glorified by the creature, may involve matters too high for us, but it implies no logical contradiction. But that God wills to damn and save the same man, is to say: God wills *to damn* him, and God wills *not to damn* him. And that is a contradiction.

4. But Van Til claims that there are apparent contradictions in the Bible, and that in such cases we simply accept both sides of the contradiction. I deny this. For

1. The Bible is the revelation of God to us, adapted to our understanding. God, Who created our logical mind, also adapted His own revelation to that mind. Hence, there surely cannot be contradictions in the Word of God. There are no contradictions in God. How could there be contradictions in His revelation to us?

2. It is true, that there may be, there are, in Scripture statements that at first blush appear to contradict each other. But it has always been sound Reformed method of exegesis to make a serious attempt to solve the difficulties by explaining those passages that appear to contradict the current teaching of the Bible, the *analogia Scripturae*, in the light of the latter. Van Til emphasizes that this method must be applied in such cases. Only, for some reason, he quite arbitrarily wants to stop at a certain point. And his objection to my method can only be that I insist that this method must be applied throughout, to the very end. And when I apply this thoroughly Reformed method to the interpretation of Holy Writ, I come to the conclusion that the theory of common grace is a myth, an invention of man's mind, not a truth of revelation.

3. But suppose now that after all our efforts there should still be apparent contradictions in the Bible. What then? Must we then not accept both sides of the contradiction? I have already shown that this is impossible. No, but in that case:

(a) We adhere to the current teaching of Scripture, and

(b) We humbly confess that as yet we have not sufficient light to solve all the difficulties, and continue our search. I sincerely believe that I have always followed this method, and that Van Til does me an injustice when accuses me of abstract reasoning or rationalism.

H. H.

## **Editorial #7: Limiting Concepts**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*, 15 Mar, 1943, vol. 19, no. 12, pp. 268-270)

Attention must be called to Van Til's idea and application of the "limiting concept," which is closely related to his notion and use of the "paradox." Let us quote him:

If we hold to a theology of the apparently paradoxical we must also hold by consequence to the Christian notion of a *limiting concept*. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept has been developed on the basis of the non-Christian conception of mystery. By contrast we may think of the Christian notion of the limiting concept as based upon the Christian notion of mystery. The non-Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of would-be autonomous man who seeks to legislate all reality, but bows before the irrational as that which he has not yet rationalized. The Christian notion of the limiting concept is the product of the creature who sets forth in systematic form something of the revelation of the Creator.

The Christian Church has consciously or unconsciously employed the notion of the limiting concept in the formulation of its creeds. In these creeds the church does not pretend to have developed the fullness of the revelation of God. The church knows itself to be dealing with the inexhaustible God. The creeds must therefore be regarded as "approximations" to the fullness of the truth as it is in God. This idea of the creeds as approximations to the fullness of the truth as it is in God must be set over against the modern notion of the creeds as approximation to abstract truth. The modern notion of approximation is based on the modern notion of the limiting concept. The modern notion of systematic logical interpretation as

approximation is therefore based on ultimate scepticism with respect to the existence of any such thing as universally valid truth. It is really no more than a hope and that a false hope, as we must believe, that there is in human interpretation an approximation to the truth, The Christian idea on the other hand rests upon the presupposition of the existence of God as the self-contained being that Scripture presents to us. The Christian idea is therefore the recognition that the creature can only touch the hem of the garment of Him who dwells in a light that no man can approach unto.

Much of this may be Greek to our average reader, and, therefore, I will make an attempt to reproduce these statements in more popular language without distorting Van Til's meaning.

Very briefly expressed, Van Til means that whenever we say something about the truth as it is in God we know and confess, that we have only said something *about* it, but we have not expressed the *fullness* of the truth. We *limit* it; we put a fence around it; we approach it. Whenever we use a limiting concept, we really do nothing else than narrow the scope of the fenced-off truth. And so, seeing that we are dealing with the inexhaustible God, we never come to an end. We can never say that we have expressed the truth. All our conceptions and declarations are ultimately only approximations to the truth as it is in God. And a *limiting concept* is such an attempt at approximation.

To this we can, of course, have no objection to, provided that the scope and purpose of the *limiting concept* itself be clearly defined. We cannot afford to let the notion of the limiting concept run loose. That would be rather dangerous, even for the Christian notion of the limiting concept. It will hardly be safe to allow anyone, Schilder, Van Til, or myself, for instance, to determine what in a given case must be considered a limiting concept. That would make all our knowledge of the truth relative and uncertain. The statement that creeds must be regarded as "approximations" to the fullness of the truth as it is in God is capable of a correct and sound interpretation, but as it stands there without further definition it cannot pass unchallenged. For that certainly would raise the question whether or not these "approximations" to the truth are themselves truths, or whether they will, perhaps, have to be revised as we approach more closely to the fullness of the truth.

It seems to me that the need of working with limiting concepts must have a definite cause. And the fundamental case lies in the fact that God is infinite, and we are finite, and that the latter can never comprehend, nor even *approach* unto the former. Van Til is quite right when at the close of the paragraph quoted above he writes:

The Christian idea is therefore the recognition that the creature can only touch the hem of the garment of Him who dwells in the light that no man can approach unto.

But this must be maintained in the strict sense of the word. God cannot be approached unto at all. This means, first of all, that *we* cannot approach *Him*, and that, if we are to have knowledge of Him at all, He must approach us. And this approach of God to us is His *revelation*. But this also implies that this revelation is the limit of our approach to God. In other words, it is possible to speak of an approximation to the fullness of the truth as it is revealed to us by God, but it is not possible to continue our approximation beyond the limit of revelation. Strictly speaking, therefore, the Christian idea of the limiting concept cannot be said to have its basis in the fact that theology is an approximation to the fullness of the truth *as it is in God*. The finite does not approach or approximate the Infinite at all.

With a view to the proper use of the "limiting concept" it seems to me, we must add two more factors. The one is that the revelation of God as we now have it in the Scriptures is a light in darkness, the truth over against the lie. The light always shines in darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it. And, secondly, we should remember that the revelation of God in Christ Jesus concerns things that "eye hath not seen, and ear hath not heard, and that never entered into the heart of man." These things are heavenly. They belong to the wonder of grace, which the natural mind cannot discover or understand.

Bearing this in mind, it seems to me, we can speak of a threefold use of the "limiting concept."

The first is caused by the fact that all our conceptions are finite, while God is infinite. Whenever, therefore, on the basis of revelation, we form conceptions of God, we hasten to add that all these conceptions are but limiting concepts, lest we worship an idol instead of the living God. Thus we confess that, while God certainly is knowable, and our concepts of God as they are based on revelation are certainly the truth, yet God is beyond the scope of our finite concepts: He is the Infinite. The first article of the *Belgic Confession* deals with such limiting concepts:

We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.

Notice that such terms as “eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, infinite” are strictly limiting concepts. They are not meant to be mere *negative* terms. They do not merely *deny* something about God. That God is infinite does not merely mean that He is not finite, but positively signifies that He is the Not-Finite. That He is said to be the Invisible does not simply deny His visibleness, but positively declares that He is the Not-Visible. And thus it is with all the other terms. They are, therefore, limiting concepts in the proper sense of the word.

The second proper use of the limiting concept finds its cause in the calling of the believer and of the Church to confess the truth concerning the mystery of God and salvation over against the lie. Perhaps this element is already present in the above confession concerning God. On the one side lies the mystery which we cannot comprehend, even though we conceive of it on the basis of the Word of God; on the other side is the darkness, the lie over against which the truth concerning the mystery must be maintained and definitely fenced off. For this purpose, too, the Church uses the limiting concept. An example of this we find in the declarations of the council of Chalcedon concerning the mystery of the Incarnation, particularly as to the relation of the two natures in Christ, stating that:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; coessential with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood ... one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, *inconfusedly (asunchutoos), unchangeably (atreptoos), indivisibly, inseparably*; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence (*eis hen prosoopon kai mian upostasin*), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ ...

Here the Church deals with limiting concepts almost throughout, occasioned on the one hand by the revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation, and on the other hand by the attack upon this mystery by the lie. This is especially evident from the well-known formulation of the relation of the two natures in Christ: “inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”

The third proper use of the limiting concept in theology is caused by the difference between the earthly and the heavenly, and the necessity of expressing in earthly terms the reality of heavenly things. How crowded with limiting concepts, for instance, is the last part of that glorious fifteenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians!

It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit ... Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed ...

And the same is true, as might be expected, of the last two chapters of the book of Revelation.

Perhaps, Van Til differs with me, but to me it seems that there is need of defining the proper use of *limiting concepts*, lest we become arbitrary, and leave the impression that all the truth as confessed by the Church is relative and uncertain.

H.H.

### **Editorial #8: Limiting Concepts and “Creatureliness”**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*; 1 April, 1943, vol. 19, no. 13, pp. 292-294)

In our last article we discussed Van Til’s notion of the “limiting concept.” And we also attempted to define the nature of the limiting concept, and to indicate the causes for the necessity of working with them. We stated that limiting concepts arise: 1. When in the light of revelation the finite mind of man attempts to form a conception of the Infinite; 2. When earthly man, in the light of the same revelation, conceives of the “things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor entered into the heart of man.” 3. When, on the other hand, the Church is called to define and limit the truth of God over against the errors of evil men, and the false philosophy of the world.

However, if I consider the instances in his book in which Van Til applies his idea of the limiting concept, I fear, that he will not so define it as I have attempted to do. Sometimes I receive the impression that with him the notion of limiting concept is akin to that of “working hypothesis,” a theory which one accepts for the time being as true in his search for the truth, but the truth of which must be still established and proved, and, perhaps, must be further defined and altered. And if this be the case, I cannot accept his notion of the limiting concept, nor consider that the confessions of the Church are limiting concepts in this sense of the word. Let us call attention to a few of these instances in Van Til’s book.

On p. 59 he writes:

With Zwier we believe that this criticism of Schilder’s is not to the point (*De Wachter*; Nov. 21, 1939, Jan. 30, 1940). For better or for worse Synod meant to teach that God has a certain attitude of favor toward the reprobate. The use of a broad popular phrase gives no justification for drawing such consequences as Schilder has drawn. Besides, the broad phrase itself expresses the fact that God loves all His creatures, And as for the idea that God loves all creatureliness as such, including the creatureliness of the devil this is, we believe intelligible only if we use it as a limiting concept. If not so used, it is an empty concept. Schilder himself has warned us to think concretely. And thinking concretely implies the use of such universals as “creatureliness” as limiting concepts only.

To the same notion of “creatureliness” the author refers on p. 95:

Accordingly we would not speak of God’s loving creatureliness always and everywhere. Schilder uses this idea. He says that God greatly loves creatureliness everywhere, whether in the drunkard, the Antichrist, or the devil (See Zwier’s discussion in *De Wachter*; Nov. 2, 1939). Creatureliness is then conceived statically, as though it were something to be found anywhere and everywhere and always by itself. But creatureliness should be used as a limiting concept. It is never found in moral beings, whether men or angels, except in connection with an ethical reaction, positive or negative. We cannot intelligently speak of God’s loving creatureliness in the devil. God’s good pleasure pertains no doubt to the devil. But that is because the devil is frustrated in his opposition to God. God has once upon a time loved the

devil. But that was before the devil was the devil. We shall make no progress on the common grace problem with the help of abstractions.

I confess that here I do not clearly understand the author's meaning of the term "limiting concept." How the concept "creatureliness" can be an empty concept when used without limitation, but becomes a material concept with definite contents when used as a "limiting concept," I fail to understand. I admit, of course, that pure "creatureliness" does not exist anywhere, not only not in moral beings, but strictly nowhere, for creation is not a conglomeration of separate creatures, but an organic whole. It is often alleged that, though God hates the fallen and sinful "world," He loves the world as His creation. But this is a pure abstraction. The "world" as a pure creation of God exists nowhere. And the same is true of "creatureliness." It simply never actually exists by itself. But this does not make the *concept* creatureliness an empty one. One can very readily define its contents. Off hand, it implies such notions as gifts and talents, intelligence, will, power, dependence, obligation, activity, development, etc. Of course, the moment I draw a conclusion from this abstract universal conception of "creatureliness" to the concretely existing creature, I make a fundamental mistake. I cannot possibly argue thus: 1. God loves "creatureliness" (which is a pure abstraction). 2. There is creatureliness in the devil (which is a very concrete form of creatureliness). 3. Therefore, God loves the devil. The very contrary of this conclusion is the truth. For, exactly because all creatureliness is of God, and because what is of God must be directed to His glory, and because the devil turns all his creatureliness against the living God, God hates the devil. But, even so, I do not use the concept "creatureliness" as a limiting concept. I simply maintain that it is a pure abstraction, that as such it does not exist anywhere, and that, therefore the judgment: "God loves creatureliness," is false, because it presents the abstract as concretely existing as an object of the love of God. But we feel that, perhaps, we do not quite understand Van Til's idea of the "limiting concept," and that he would render us a service if he would clearly define his notion of it, and could tell us exactly under what conditions he would have it employed.

The same desire for more light on the subject is aroused by the following paragraph:

But we must go further than this. Man was originally created good. That is to say, there was (as? H. H.) a matter of fact, an ethical reaction on the part of man, and this ethical reaction was approved by God. It may be said that God created man with a good nature, but that the test was still to come whether he would voluntarily live in accord with his good nature. But surely Adam could not live for a second without acting morally. The "good nature" of Adam cannot be taken otherwise than as a limiting concept. Further still, the decisive representative act was still to come. Granted that Adam's nature was an active nature, this active nature itself must be taken as a limiting concept in relation to the decisive ethical reaction that was to take place in connection with the probationary command. This goes to prove that the representative act of obedience or disobedience presupposed for its possibility the revelational character of everything created. It goes to prove further, that man's good ethical reaction must be taken as an aspect of that revelatory character of everything created. To be sure, this good reaction was not the consummated good that shall be obtained in the case of those that will be in glory. Yet it was a good ethical reaction. It was good not so much in a lower *sense* as in an *earlier* sense (p. 94).

Now, I understand that all this must be viewed and understood in the light of Van Til's conception of the "covenant of works." For us, who have become quite accustomed to the repudiation of the implications of this so-called "covenant of works," there is a danger of trying to understand (and, therefore, of failing to understand completely) Van Til's notion of the "good nature of Adam as a limiting concept" from the viewpoint of our own conception of Adam's relation to God in the state of original rectitude. It is well, therefore, that we remember that Van Til labours with the traditional conception of the "covenant of works."

According to this conception Adam's state would have been changed, and, accordingly, God's attitude toward him would have been altered, even had he obeyed the "probationary command." If he disobeyed, his state would be changed to that of a guilty and damnable sinner, and God's attitude would have been changed to that of wrath; if he obeyed, his state would have been changed to that of highest and heavenly glory, of "the consummated good" and God's attitude would have become that of permanent favor. In other words, Adam's good works, his good ethical

reaction to God's revelation, merited a higher good, eternal life. Now, for a time (it makes no particle of difference how long, a day, a week, a year, or a hundred years) Adam's reaction was good. He obeyed. Not only did he not immediately eat of the tree of knowledge, but all his ethical reactions were good. Van Til draws still another conclusion from this fact. According to him, the elect and the reprobate were in him, and represented by him. Hence, according to Van Til, it may be said that for a time the elect and reprobate both did good works in Adam, and God loves them both in the original state of righteousness.

But now Van Til, if I understand him correctly, perceives a difficulty. Before the final act of disobedience, Adam's nature was constantly active, and the ethical reaction of that nature was constantly good. What is the inevitable conclusion of this fact, when viewed in the light of the "covenant of works" theory? This, of course, that all this time before the fall (it makes no difference how long) Adam really merited eternal life, or, at least, merited more than he had in Paradise, for himself and for his posterity. Every good ethical reaction of Adam was meritorious. This leads to the question: what became of this reward? Evidently, it was all cancelled by the later act of disobedience on the part of Adam. What then? When viewed in the light of this later act of disobedience, can we still say without qualification that Adam's nature before the fall was a "good nature," and that his ethical reaction was a *good* ethical reaction? To this Van Til replies:

The "good nature" of Adam cannot be taken otherwise than as a limiting concept.

And again:

Granted that Adam's nature was an active nature, this active nature itself must be taken as a limiting concept in relation to the decisive ethical reaction that was to take place in connection with the probationary command.

And here, it seems, the term "limiting concept" is employed in the sense of "a concept with qualification." For the time being the nature of Adam appears and reacts as a good nature. But when viewed in the light of what took place later, that nature proved not to be good without qualifications. It was good in a limited sense.

If we misinterpret Van Til's meaning, we trust that he will let us know, and explain himself.

In the meantime, we do not share Van Til's conception of the "covenant of works," and certainly not his idea that Adam in the state before the fall, and by his good ethical reaction, represented both the elect and the reprobate. And for the same reason we have no difficulty of taking the statement that Adam was created "good and after God's own image," without qualification.

But even so, and even if we have interpreted Van Til's notion of the limiting concept in this particular passage of his book correctly, we still have no very clear idea of what he means by the term "limiting concept." He certainly could do us a favor by serving us with a definition.

H. H.

## **Editorial #9: "As If" Philosophy**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*; 1 May, 1943, vol. 19, no. 15, pp. 340-342)

We must still call the attention of our readers to Van Til's "As If" philosophy. It is, according to him, especially with a view to the practical cooperation between the Christian and the non-Christian in this world, that we have need of an "as if," and we actually proceed on its tacit assumption of presupposition.

We cannot quote here all that Van Til has to say on this subject. Yet, before we discuss this notion, we will let him present his ideas in his own words.

He writes on p. 18:

On what basis then can we speak of cooperation between believer and unbeliever? It is on the ground that both have all facts in common objectively. Both deal with the same universe. Both are meant in the counsel of God to cooperate in bringing out the meaning of history. The believer's affirmation of God is to be worked out in contrast with the unbeliever's denial of God. The unbeliever's negation of God is to be worked out in contrast with the believer's affirmation of God. If this is to be accomplished "cooperation" between believer and unbeliever is unavoidable. Believer and unbeliever may in this sense be said to vie with one another in bringing out the glory of God, In the second place, since believer and non-believer have nothing in common subjectively the nature of the cooperation between them must be an "as if" cooperation. That is, it must be an "as if" cooperation of the Christian sort for the believer. Because of his ultimate scepticism the non-believer, as noted, virtually holds that all opinions are equally valuable. He therefore thinks, theoretically at least, of the believer's opinion as being on a par with every other opinion, and he is willing to cooperate on this basis. Yet, when, and to the extent that he becomes epistemologically self-conscious he will no longer cooperate. He may even then cooperate hypocritically but this is because he, as yet, lacks the power of oppression. The believer, on the other hand, knowing that he has the truth and that the non-believer builds on the lie, acts on an "as if" basis with the non-believer in order that the glory of God may be advanced. He knows he must be in the world with those who are "of the world." He also knows that while in the world with those that are of the world he must himself not become of the world. He is a soldier of the cross who must fight during the whole course of his life on earth. Every soldier must sleep. All the soldiers must be fed and clothed. Thus there is a legitimate while necessary abstraction from the believer's duty to make God and His Christ known to all men everywhere, all the time. It is for the very purpose of fulfilling his duty of glorifying God that he must act "as if" there were certain facts that laws that he has in common with the unbeliever.

We may pause here a moment, in order to remind ourselves how we always presented the matter of which Van Til here speaks. It is evident that he is dealing here with the antithesis. This antithesis, according to him, results from the fact that believers and unbelievers in this world have all things in common objectively, but subjectively have nothing in common. And this antithesis will become manifest more sharply according as the believer and unbeliever become more self-conscious epistemologically. I cannot agree with this presentation of the matter. The problem of what believer and unbeliever have in common cannot be correctly stated in terms derived from the relation of the objective and subjective, but must be presented in the light of the realities of "nature" and sin and grace. The believer and unbeliever have all things in common, objectively and subjectively, except grace. They are in and deal with the same world, and they have the same means and powers, the same faculty of knowledge, the same sensation, perception, imagination, and reason. But on the basis of the sameness they stand in antithesis to each other in a spiritual, ethical sense, the unbeliever living his whole life in this world from the principle of sin, which is enmity against God, while the believer lives in principle from grace, the love of God in Christ Jesus his Lord.

Perhaps, I do not understand Van Til's last remark in the above paragraph. How the fact that "every soldier must sleep," and that "all the soldiers must be fed and clothed," can possibly abstract from the believer's duty to "make God and His Christ known to all men everywhere, all the time," I fail to see. Does Van Til mean that the necessity for the Christian in this world to maintain his earthly subsistence and his position in the world, absolves him to an extent from his obligation always and everywhere to live from the principle of regeneration, and gives him the right really to live in cooperation with the unbeliever "as if" he is in spiritual agreement with him? I cannot believe that he can mean this. If he does I most emphatically deny the truth of this position. If he means something else, the statement is in need of some elucidation.

But let us quote a little more on this subject. On pp. 18, 19 we read:

We shall therefore need first an “as if” for daily life. When I say the grass is green and my non-believing neighbor says the grass is green we must act “as if” both meant the same thing. Interpretatively considered, my neighbor and I mean quite different matters. As an unbeliever he means that in a Chance universe, in which this change-born thing called human rationality thinks it finds or constructs certain “as if” universals, there is such a thing as he sees fit to call colour, and there is a certain specimen of this colour before him now which, in distinction from other such specimens, he chooses to call green. As a believer I mean that in a God-created universe I, as God’s rational creature, observe a God-created fact in relation to a God-created law. I must seek and have sought on other occasions to convince my neighbor that his interpretation is impossible and that mine alone gives meaning to this thing we both call green. But for purposes of daily life we must both abstract from our interpretative endeavours and speak and act “as if” we meant the same thing when we say the grass is green. He needs me and I need him even in order that our mutually contradictory interpretations of life may be brought into being. And as I know that his interpretation, that is his negation of God, ultimately must become subordinate to my affirmation of God, my “as if” treatment of my interpretative opponent is in obedience to the command that I must do all things self-consciously to the glory of God. My “as if” treatment of my opponent is no lapse into neutrality. It is a self-consciously interpretative procedure on my part.

This is a rather interesting paragraph, which is worthy of some careful analysis. And analysing it, I come to the following observations:

1. That Van Til and his unbelieving neighbor do not act on an “as if” basis when they say “the grass is green,” but that they very really do mean the same thing, as long as neither of them says any more. They look at the same grass, with similar eyes, similar sensations and perception. There is no “as if” about this at all. In fact, if this were not the case, there would be no possibility of conversing about this fact with each other. The very fact that Van Til on a fresh spring morning in May, and after a copious shower of rain, steps out of his house, and finding his sceptic philosopher of a neighbor also outdoors, says to him: “How green the grass is this morning,” is sufficient evidence of his conviction that his neighbor is capable of seeing exactly the same thing. As long, then, as Van Til and his agnostic of a neighbor say no more than “the grass is green,” they are mutually confident that they mean the same thing. They do not act on an “as if” basis at all in the making of this statement.

2. Of course, as soon as they say more, they differ. But the difference is again not one of mere philosophical interpretation of a fact, as Van Til presents the matter. The difference is spiritual-ethical: it is a matter of sin and grace. Even for the agnostic neighbor “the invisible things of God, even from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that made, even His eternal power and Godhead.” God speaks even through the green grass, and it is a speech that also addresses itself to the non-believing neighbor of Van Til’s. But the unbeliever holds the truth in unrighteousness. He says in his heart that there is no God. He opposes the speech of God. And over against this wicked attitude of the ungodly, Van Til rightly witnesses of the Word of God. He does not oppose his interpretation to the philosophy of the unbelieving neighbor, but he witnesses of the Word of God as coming through the green grass, and that, too, in the light of Scripture. The moment, then, Van Til and his neighbor say *more* than simply “the grass is green,” they are opponents, not as two coolly differing philosophers, but as representatives of the thesis and the antithesis, God and the devil, Christ and antichrist, light and darkness. They mean the same thing no longer. Neither can they act here on an “as if” basis. Certainly Van Til does not mean that he may leave the impression ever that he agrees with his agnostic neighbor.

When, therefore, both say “the grass is green” they say and mean the same thing: there is no need of an “as if.”

When they say more, they agree no longer, and may not act “as if” they meant the same thing.

The real question, then, is whether the Christian may ever simply say that the grass is green, leaving God out of his expressed thought.

H. H.

## **Editorial #10: “As If” and Witnessing**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*, 1 June, 1943, vol. 19, no. 17, pp. 388-390)

A rather striking illustration is used by Van Til to clarify his application of the “As If” theory. He criticizes Dr. Kuyper’s conception of “territories” (*terreinen-leer*), according to which the latter assigns to believers and unbelievers a certain common ground of living and cooperation. He, Van Til, does not agree with this theory, and admits that this conception of Kuyper’s is not to be harmonized with his doctrine of the antithesis.

I may remind our readers that we criticized this “terreinen-leer” of Dr. Kuyper’s long ago, and even before attention was called to this element in Kuyper’s teaching in the Netherlands. Only we always held, and still hold, what Van Til is unwilling to admit, that this doctrine of “territories” or of a common ground in this world for the righteous and the wicked must and does inevitably and undeniably follow from the theory of common grace. For, according to this theory the elect and reprobate, regenerate and unregenerate, have a certain *grace* in common. Even this statement, without any further explanation or elaboration, leads to the conclusion, that there must be a common ground on which they agree and cooperate by virtue of this grace. For, common grace is not merely concerned with an “attitude” of God, supposed to be revealed in the many gifts God bestows upon the righteous and the wicked alike, but it is also a *power* for good, an *operation* upon the nature of fallen man, both the elect and the reprobate. And by this operation of grace the natural man is very really improved, without being regenerated. According to the Second and Third Points of 1924 this operation of grace is a working of the Holy Spirit in the unregenerate, restraining sin, an influence of God whereby the sinner is so improved that he is able to perform civil righteousness.

I am aware that sometimes this operation of grace is so explained that its effect is a mere negative restraint of sin. But this is not really the meaning of this part of the doctrine of common grace. Let us remember:

- (1) That a mere restraint could never be productive of some positive good.
- (2) That Dr. Kuyper presents this operation of common grace as having been begun in Paradise, at the fall, so that Adam did not fall so deeply as he would have fallen, had God not administered a dose of common grace. I refer to Kuyper’s illustration of the man that takes “Paris green” [a poison] and to whom an antidote is administered. Common grace, therefore, does not operate in a totally depraved nature, according to this view, but in a nature which is not yet wholly corrupt, and whose total corruption is prevented for the time being by the antidote of common grace.
- (3) That Kuyper himself clearly saw that he would gain nothing by a theory of mere restraint. He very consciously faced the question, how mere restraint of sin in the totally corrupt sinner could possibly yield positive fruit in good works. Hence, he attributed to common grace a positive influence for good, even upon the mind and will of the unregenerate. But if there be such an operation of positive grace upon believers and unbelievers in this world, how can the conclusion be avoided that they have a common life, a common ground on which they cooperate? It is no longer a question of cooperation between righteous and wicked, but between men that are alike under the influence of a certain grace. And what is the common ground on which believer and unbeliever meet? In one word: the present world.

And such is not only the logical inference from the theory of common grace, but such are also its actual results.

I do not hesitate to characterize the common grace theory as downright modernism in principle, which is only worse than open modernism because it presents itself under the cloak of Calvinism!

Now, instead of this “*terreinen-leer*,” Van Til would have the believer and unbeliever cooperate on an “As If” basis. This means that it is admitted that “cooperation pure and simple the believer cannot have, without compromise to his faith, at any point, with the unbeliever” (Van Til’s book, p. 31), but that actually they do cooperate “as if” they had anything in common.

And now the illustration of which I spoke in the beginning of this article. I quote from p. 31 of “Common Grace,” by Van Til:

To this we must now add that the non-believer is not epistemologically self-conscious. Only Satan and his host have reached that point. Yet some of the men of this world may seek to live close to their master. They are epistemologically self-conscious to such a degree as we may expect to see this side of the judgment day. Ought not in their case cooperation with the believer to be of the “as if” variety? A reasonably self-conscious believer and a reasonably self-conscious non-believer may each build a house on adjoining plots of ground. While they build they have the “*metaphysical situation*” in common. But obtain their materials from the same source. Both have learned their skill from the same master builder. Quite courteously they assist each other with interchange of ideas and material. But only the believer has a clear title to his property. In fact the believer holds a clear title to both plots of ground. He has, he says, inherited it from his Father who owns all things. Moreover he has warned his neighbour of this fact. He has offered to give his neighbour clear title to the ground on which he is building. The unbeliever has spurned this offer. He claims to hold title in his own right. He says he has inherited his title from the “Prince of this world” himself. He denies that the believer has, had, or ever can have any claim to his property. He goes further than that, he claims to have inherited title to the ground on which the believer is building. Thus both parties claim title to both plots of ground. Their “*common judgment*” is common only up to a certain point.

Now, I would like to see two such neighbours, both of whom claim the right of all the property, and who tell each other over their backyard fence that the other fellow has no right to exist in this world—I would like to see them cooperate with each other even on an “as if” basis. I am afraid that not much would come of their friendly interchange of ideas and materials, as long as they stand in this attitude over against each other. If the believer wants to live with his unbelieving neighbour on the basis of an “as if,” especially with one who openly professes that he inherits all things from his father the devil, he must not make the good confession, he must not only *act*, but also *speak* “as if” they do the same thing when they build a house. That, I think, Scripture teaches plainly. They hated Christ, they will also hate those that are His. And the more they openly confess the *Lord* Jesus, the more they must expect to experience the hatred of the world. And this is also verified in experience. If you want to live on a friendly footing of cooperation with those that are enemies of Christ, you must compromise in word as well as in deed, especially with a view to the concrete things of this world and the present life. As long as you enclose your religion within the four walls of your church, and limit it to your private life and to your home, you may not encounter opposition. But when you begin to insist that Jesus is Lord always and everywhere, and try to apply your confession to such things as houses and lots, you will make it impossible to live on an “as if” basis with the wicked.

And yet, I do not believe that Van Til here offers the correct conception of the antithesis between sin and grace, between the wicked and the righteous. It is my conviction that this particular believer would not speak the truth, but would speak very foolishly, if he made the claim that he has a clear title, not only to his own, but also to his neighbour’s lot, and that his neighbour had no title to his lot at all. It is perfectly true, of course, that in Christ the believer is the rightful heir of

the world, but that has reference to the future world, not to the present. The righteous shall inherit the earth, to be sure, but that is after this present world shall have been destroyed by fire, and the new heavens and the new earth shall have been created. It is also true, that in a sense all things in this world are ours, for Christ is surely Lord, and all things must serve His purpose. They all move and develop around Him and His Church, so that all things are subservient to their salvation. In that sense that wicked neighbour who professes the devil as his Lord, his plot of ground, his house and all he does, and all the wicked, yea, life and *death* are the believer's. But that does not mean that the believer can claim that his neighbour's plot of ground is his also. That is exactly not the case. It belongs to the common "metaphysical situation" as Van Til calls it, that the wicked and the righteous in this world have all things in common, also lots and houses. That particular plot of ground very really belongs to his neighbour in the providence of God, and not to the believer, nor will he ever possess that particular plot of ground through any clear title from Christ. Such a title to that particular plot of ground in this present world the believer does not possess, and Christ did not merit it for him.

That, therefore, I consider a mistake. When the believer acts under the acknowledgment that that particular plot of ground is his unbelieving neighbour's and not his, he does not act on an "as if" basis at all.

What, then, might the believing neighbour say to that wicked man that built his house on a neighbouring plot of ground? He may and should say this: "God gave you that plot of ground, and it remains His. Before God no man can have any absolute right of possession. That plot of ground is capital with which you may work as His servant. And what is true of that plot of ground is true of your building material, of your skill and strength to build your house. It is true, in fact, of all you are and have, of your body and soul, of your gifts and talents, of your money and possessions, of your wife and children, of your name and position in this world. It is all God's, and it can be yours only in the sense that with it you must love and serve the Lord your God. Do not speak of your rights. You have no rights in the absolute sense of the word. Rather speak of obligation to glorify God in your body and soul, and with all you have. That is your sacred calling. And if you do not fulfil that calling, but simply use this world, your lots and houses and all things for the lust of your own flesh, God is terribly angry with you, and He will punish you both in time and in eternity. And this calling you can never fulfil, for you are dead through trespasses and sins. But this is possible for those that are in Christ Jesus. I advise you, therefore, to seek forgiveness of your sins in His blood, and grace to be delivered from the dominion of sin, that you may see your house and lot in the proper light, and glorify God with it."

H. H.

### **Editorial #11: "As If" and the Three Points**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*; 1 July, 1943, vol. 19, no. 19, pp. 432-434)

As a rule for the believer's life in this world, Van Til's "as if" theory is, I think, quite inadequate. The rule, if I understand Van Til correctly, is that the believer must "to a certain extent" assume the attitude toward the unbeliever and live with him "as if" there was something in common between them apart from the "metaphysical situation." It would seem that this principle as a standard of living for the Christian in the world is rather vague, stretchy, and ambiguous. The question arises inevitably: to what extent would Van Til apply this "as if" theory in actual life? It appears that he would give no definite answer to this question, but that he would let the extent of the "commonness" between the believer and the non-believer be continued upon the degree of their "epistemological consciousness." The more they become "epistemologically self-conscious" the more the "territory-in-between" narrows in scope; the less self-conscious they are in this respect, the larger is the field of their cooperation and common activity. But all this is quite subjective, relative, and ambiguous. It would be very difficult, on this basis,

for the church to take any stand at all, and act accordingly, in concrete cases of amalgamation with the world on the part of the Christian. What stand would Van Til suggest, for instance, in such cases as membership of the worldly unions, the lodge, all kinds of worldly clubs and associations; or in cases of indulgence in worldly pleasures, theatre and movie attendance, etc.? In all these cases, those that defend membership, or indulge in such pleasures, frequently appeal persistently to their lack of “epistemological self-consciousness:” they cannot see any wrong in it! Must the Church be satisfied with this subjective excuse, or will she have to take a stand and act according to some objective criterion?

As for me, I am quite convinced that Scripture must have nothing of the “as if” theory of Van Til. It teaches us very distinctly that believers and unbelievers have *all things* in common in this world except *grace*, and that, for this reason, there can be no agreement or cooperation between them in the spiritual-ethical sense at all. On the common stage of “natural” things, they live from the principles of sin and grace respectively. And these two have nothing in common. Hence:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty (II Cor. 6:14-18).

There is no “as if” about this clear exhortation of Holy Writ.

And how this “as if” theory can be applied to God and to His attitude toward the elect and reprobate, I confess to be wholly beyond the scope of my comprehension. Yet, this too Van Til appears to think quite possible and proper. Discussing the difference of opinion between Zwier and Schilder with regard to the question of “a certain grace of God to the reprobate,” he writes as follows:

With the last statement of Schilder we may well express agreement. We may add that in making up the balance all of the factors existing in man at any particular time in history must also be taken into consideration. We are Schilder’s pupils if we say that in everything Scriptural we deal with “covenant-dating.” If we speak of grace to the non-elect, we must, therefore, with Zwier speak of a “certain grace.” This indicates the fact that all of God’s attributes have been thought of simultaneously. It is to recognize that there is a similarity of attitude on God’s part toward the elect and the non-elect, but a similarity with a difference. It is therefore an “as if” similarity (p. 61).

Now, as far as I can see, if this last statement is supposed to have any real meaning, it signifies that God assumes an attitude to the reprobate “*as if*” He were gracious to them, while in reality He is not at all. He acts “as if” He blesses them while in reality He curses them. But even Van Til could not possibly mean this, for it would ascribe duplicity to the living God. But if he does mean this, what sense does the statement have: “It is therefore an ‘as if’ similarity?”

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However, this leads us to the consideration of Van Til’s discussion of the “Three Points,” particularly of the question concerning the gracious attitude of God to the elect and reprobate alike, and, still more particularly, that which concerns the “general well-meaning offer of grace and salvation on the part of God.” After his discussion of the principles of the philosophy of history which we have tried to explain to our readers thus far, Van Til offers a criticism of all that has been written on the problem of grace in recent years. He begins by discussing Kuyper’s

views (pp. 22-32). Thereupon he gives a review and evaluation of the “debate on common grace” including a discussion of the “Three Points” (pp. 32-65). And the book closes with “Some Suggestions for Further Discussion.” We are now concerned with his review of the “debate on common grace,” and particularly with his evaluation of the “Three Points.”

But we must limit ourselves. To enter into all the detail of Van Til’s criticism would make our discussion too lengthy, and, besides, would necessarily lead us simply to repeat what we have written long ago and repeatedly. We will, therefore, select some points that seem to us to be of chief importance.

Let me begin by saying that in his presentation of our criticism of the Three Points, Van Til is quite fair. He quotes rather elaborately from our writings on the subject, and leaves a rather correct impression of our chief objections against the doctrines adopted by the 1924 Synod of Kalamazoo. And this we appreciate, especially in view of the fact that we have not been used to such treatment on the part of those that sought to defend the Three Points over against our criticism of them. But what be said of the fairness of Van Til’s critique as long as he presents our view, is not always true of his critical evaluation of the same. He writes that we “have been unable to be fair” to our opponents (p. 53). I now raise the same complaint against Van Til’s criticism of our position. I do not mean to bring this as an accusation, as if he purposely distorts our view in his criticism. The fact remains that he does so, nevertheless.

Thus, for instance, Van Til writes about our criticism of the “two wills” in God defended by Heyns as if we had proposed a fatalistic, deterministic view of man in relation to God. I quote from p. 53:

Over against this, however, Hoeksema argues the equally abstract, in fact more abstract, position that the “facts” do not exist at all since they must be interpreted in the universal God. This is, we believe, involved in what we have heard him say, particularly in what he says about the relation of the divine will to the human. His argument is very similar here to that of Karl Barth. God, because He is God, says Hoeksema, cannot offer anything. He says that even the murderer does not resist the will of God on the ground that he is punished for his murder. These points, and others of a similar nature, presuppose the idea that a party to be a party next to God must be an absolute or underivative party, and that man to resist the will of God must resist the secret counsel of God. On this point, we believe the criticism of Heyns fair enough. It is perfectly true that God cannot and does not “in the same sense with respect to the same Object” will the mutually contradictory. But the thrust of Hoeksema goes further than that. It says that because man is not ultimate and therefore cannot set aside the secret counsel of God it follows that man can *in no sense* set aside the will of God. Or when man obeys the will of God he in no sense really obeys; it is God that obeys in him. It is thus that Barth, not committed to the doctrine of temporal creation as he is, reasons; it is virtually thus also that Hoeksema reasons. It is in effect to say that the distinction between the revealed and the secret will of God has no significance. It is to do away, in short, with the significance of “secondary causes”; it is to destroy the meaning of the relative on the ground that we must believe in an absolute that is really an Absolute.

Now, we have become acquainted with Van Til’s tendency to compare someone, especially the undersigned, with Karl Barth. Van Halsema, we recall, was greatly impressed by this novel comparison, and put me to bed with that Swiss theologian. And even though comparisons are odious, I am not at all offended at this as far as Van Til is concerned, though, I think, he should warn his satellites, whose imagination is set afire by such comparisons even though they know nothing about their implications, not to repeat them blindly and ignorantly, lest they make fools of themselves in public. But it is not natural that Van Til, who has been making a good deal of study of Karl Barth, is even, I am informed, going to publish a critique of Barth in the near future, should be inclined to look at others from the viewpoint of their comparison with Barth.

Now, I have stated before, and will repeat it here, that even though I would not be classified as a Barthian theologian, and feel quite sure that, if I should attempt to do this, Barth would immediately disown me and expel me from his school, I have a notion that Van Til and I do not agree on the question just what Barth teaches, and, therefore, we differ in our

criticism of him. I am afraid that, because of this fact, Van Til is suspicious that I rather agree with *his* Barth, i.e. with Barth as he sees him; while the truth is, that I do not agree with *my own* Barth, i.e. with Barth as I see him, even though I do not agree with the statement that “facts do not exist at all since they must be interpreted in the universal of God,” whether Barth would put it that way or not. And, again, whether or not Barth would subscribe to such a doctrine or repudiate it, I certainly would never teach, that “when man obeys the will of God he in no sense really obeys; it is God that obeys in him.” In fact, in my opinion this last statement is a contradiction in terms.

However, this is an ever interesting problem. And I must say a little more about it next time, the Lord willing.

H. H.

## **Editorial #12: “Fatalism and Murder**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*, 15 September 1943, vol. 19, no. 22, pp. 501-502)

Naturally, after reading Van Til’s criticism of my position over against Prof. Heyns, as set forth in my booklet “[The Gospel](#),” I once more turned to that booklet to discover whether I really wrote anything that might suggest such a fatalistic conception of man as a moral agent as Van Til attributes to me. And I must confess that I not only failed to find anything that might reasonably explain Van Til’s criticism, but that it seems to me that what I actually wrote should have been sufficient to convince him that my views are the very opposite from what he presented them to be. How the brother could possibly inform the public that I teach that “when a man obeys the will of God he in no sense really obeys; it is God that obeys in him,” I am at a loss to explain. He certainly cannot quote one item of my writings in support of that statement. I must kindly ask him to correct this rather serious error.

In the meantime, I can do no better than quote from the above mentioned booklet what I actually wrote on this matter. The booklet is written in the Holland language, and I translate:

Apart from his imaginary Scriptural proof, Prof. Heyns also has some objections of a practical nature against those who reject the doctrine of a general, well-meant offer of grace and salvation. According to his conviction, the heresy of denying this doctrine of an offer is very serious, so serious that it ought to be opposed and rejected by us with all our might, no less serious than the error of Remonstrantism. We must, therefore, also consider for a moment these practical objections, on which this conviction of the professor is based, in order then to conclude by mentioning some practical objections of our own against the proposition of a general offer.

The first objection mentioned by Prof. Heyns, is that, strictly speaking, on the standpoint of those who deny a general, well-meant offer of grace and salvation, one is compelled to deny that God’s commandments are well-meant, and have binding force. In order to make very clear in what direction such a denial must necessarily lead us, the professor calls the attention of his readers to the illustration of a murderer. Someone committed murder. He committed this murder in accord with the counsel of God. Hence, God willed that the man should commit murder. Now, if you proceed from the logical proposition that God cannot *will* and *not will* the same thing at the same time, you will simply maintain the one fact of the unchangeable counsel of God, and say: God willed that the man should commit a murder; hence, it is impossible that He did not will it: the sixth commandment, “thou shalt not kill,” was not valid for this murderer and is not valid for any murderer, is applicable only to those that never murder. And thus, logical consistency compels those who deny that there are two wills in God to deny also the general validity of the commandments of God. If there are not two wills in God, there is no general offer: this Heyns understands very well. But, he

concludes, if there are not two wills in God, then there cannot be a law of God with general binding force.

When I read this, I had to admit that the professor's argument was rather ingenious: such a horrible presentation of our conception is, indeed, calculated to frighten the "inexperienced." Imagine, people will say, that Rev. Hoeksema of Grand Rapids teaches that God wills that men shall murder! A clear proof, indeed, that the denial of common grace is a dangerous heresy! Well may one abhor such an error like the pestilence! However, one can also put it on too thick. And although there, perhaps, are those that are sufficiently naïve to swallow this, anyone that does a little thinking for himself will draw the conclusion that the professor must be guilty of a little exaggeration. In fact, the professor himself is so kind as to admit that we do not draw such conclusions as he presents. But, if we only would be consistent, we would necessarily arrive at such a monstrous conception as the professor here attributes to us!

The reader understands, of course, that we not only do not draw such conclusions, but also that the Professor's logic is not ours. The Professor asserted somewhere that through sin our rational faculty was so corrupted that we cannot trust our logic anymore. In view of the above reasoning of the Professor's I am almost inclined to believe it. But the truth is that we cannot permit the Professor to draw conclusions from our fundamental principles. He so distorts our reasoning that it actually appears as if his "consequenzmacheri" is our way of reasoning. But he that looks below the surface soon discovers sophistry here. Heyns' reasoning is somewhat similar to the well-known syllogism: 1. Is that your dog? Yes. 2. Is that dog a mother? Yes. 3. Then that dog is your mother! Or, as the enemies of the grace of God distorted the teaching of the Apostle: 1. We are justified freely without works. 2. Hence, the more we sin, the greater becomes grace. 3. Let us therefore sin, that grace may abound!

We will continue this quotation next time, the Lord willing.

H. H.

### **Editorial #13: God's Will and Man's Sin**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*; 1 October, 1943, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 4-5)

Permit me to continue my quotation from my booklet, "[\*The Gospel\*](#)," to demonstrate how little ground Van Til has for his indictment that I really make God the Subject of man's obedience or disobedience:

What then is the fallacy of Heyns' reasoning? When, on our part, we deny the doctrine of the two wills, we deny the theory *that God can will two exact opposites in the same sense and with respect to the same objects*. This is what Heyns teaches. He claims: 1. God *wills* that all men shall be saved. 2. God does *not will* that all men shall be saved. These two propositions in that form represent nonsense pure and simple. I even claim that no one can accept both propositions. There is no faith that can embrace them. I do not hesitate to assert that Heyns himself does not believe them. As soon as he declares that he believes the first proposition, he thereby already asserted that he does not believe the second proposition. However, in order to make these two contradictory propositions somewhat acceptable, Heyns explained the first will of God, according to which He wills that all men shall be saved as a *longing* or *desire* on the part of God, the second as a *decree*. God *desires* that all men shall be saved, but in view of the fact that something interfered from without to frustrate this desire, God decreed to save the elect only. And thus Heyns destroys God's decree! Heyns' God is not God! But what does he do? He argues: if you deny the two wills in God, you must also deny the validity of God's commandments. And what is his error? This, that intentionally or unintentionally, he overlooks the difference between God's will of decree and His ethical will. The argument Heyns ascribes to us runs as follows: 1. God wills (according to His decree) that someone

commits murder. 2. God therefore wills (ethically) murder. 3. God cannot be serious about the sixth commandment. Now, we never taught anything like this. Such a thing could never arise in the mind of any Reformed man. Nor is this logic—it is sophistry. The error is that Heyns tries to introduce *his* dualistic presentation, and then ascribe *his* erroneous conclusion to us.

But we do not argue this. Our argumentation runs as follows:

1. God willed, eternally and sovereignly, the coming and occurrence of that which He hates (the sinner and sin); and that, too, in order that His righteousness and holiness might become manifest as hatred of sin. God's counsel is not dualistic, but antithetical. Even as God therefore knew His own eternally in love, so He eternally knew and knows with a sovereign hate of His good pleasure the reprobates. In His counsel, the elect *are* known, ordained, called, justified, and glorified. In His counsel the reprobates *are* rejected, fallen, lost, cast into outer darkness. What occurs in time, God has eternally before Himself and with Himself. Eternally He loves Jacob, eternally He hates Esau. God, therefore, hates the ungodly and their works eternally! For, and this it is that Heyns constantly forgets: God is GOD!

2. When, therefore, the ungodly, in committing sin, *executes God's decree*, then he performs, as a rational-moral creature, willingly and consciously, *that which God hates*. (Van Til ought to pay special attention to that, that he may revise his opinion, and correct his error. Here, to be sure, the ungodly is presented as being the responsible subject of his own actions, not God.) That he executes the decree of God, does not alter the fact that in the execution of that decree he does what is in conflict with the will of God, and that which He hates, so that he becomes the object of God's avenging justice. Thus the Scriptures teach us: when the ungodly Jews crucify Jesus, they fulfil God's counsel, yet do what He hates. Thus Pharaoh was ordained, "raised up" to say "No" to God. And as he stands there in Egypt, so he stands eternally in the counsel of God, and that, too, in order that God might show His power in him. And even as God hates him as he stands in all his ungodly rebellion in Egypt, so does God hate him eternally with the sovereign hatred of His good pleasure in His counsel.

3. When the ungodly fulfils God's counsel in time, doing that which He hates, God maintains Himself over against him, and shows him that He hates him because of his ungodly works, even as He hated him eternally in His counsel, and therefore He persists in His demand of that ungodly man: "Thou shalt love Me and keep My commandments." And this demand of the law of God, in which God maintains Himself as the Eternal Good, the ungodly also faces as he appears in God's eternal counsel. And this demand he also confronts in time. Indeed, it *all* is firmly established in the sovereign good pleasure of God, Who is GOD indeed!

Van Til will have to admit that the above presentation is quite contrary to what he attributes to us as our view, and that we do not present God as the real subject of man's actions. It is true that in the above quotation we do not speak of *obedience*, but of *disobedience*. Principally, however, this makes no difference. And, besides, there is in the same booklet of ours on "[The Gospel](#)" a paragraph setting forth our view of the relation between God and man's obedience, which we will quote the next time, D. V.

H. H.

## **Editorial #14: Man's Will and Nature**

(Originally published in *The Standard Bearer*, 15 October, 1943, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 24-25)

That Van Til has no ground whatsoever for the accusation that we present God as the real Subject of man's actions, and that, on the contrary, he had plenty of material in his possession to convince him exactly of the opposite, may become still more evident from the following quotation from my booklet, "[The Gospel](#)":

Of a similar nature is the objection of Heyns' that our view presents men as being passive. Man, Heyns teaches, must do something to be saved. It simply will not do just to tell him: you have to do absolutely nothing! No, he must believe and convert himself! Doing this he will be saved. Well, on this point we agree perfectly. We would even refuse to accept Heyns' proposition that small children are not saved through faith. To be sure, in the way of faith and conversion man is saved. But we do not agree with him, when he insists that the offer of salvation sets man to work. He means to say, that, if we do not proclaim a general, well-meant offer of grace, man will passively sit down and wait for God as a stock and block. But again, Heyns overlooks two facts, for the simple reason that he does not think Reformed. He overlooks that no offer of grace will ever set man to work. And he also overlooks that almighty grace does just this, and that, too, without fail. There is absolutely no danger that he, who is drawn through the grace of God becomes a stock and a block, no more than that there is any danger that the ungodly will reveal himself and act as a stock and block over against the Gospel. No, under true Reformed preaching every man is called to stand before the face of the living God. The ungodly is touched in his conscience, and is condemned, when he repeatedly and constantly says: "No; I do not want God!" And he that is the recipient of God's grace cannot help to exclaim: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And God is justified in the consciences of both when He judges.

This should be sufficient to convince the reader that Van Til had absolutely no ground for his indictment that we make God the real subject of man's obedience or disobedience. Let me add a few remarks concerning my view of this interesting and frequently discussed problem.

1. Man's moral freedom can never mean that he is sovereignly and independently free to choose and act regardless of the will of God's decree. It may be readily granted that here we deal with a problem which in last analysis we cannot solve, but we must say all we can about it in the light of Scripture, in order to avoid falling into the error of Pelagianism. And the Bible teaches us very plainly, that, although man ever remains a moral agent, he is, even so, limited on every side by the will and counsel of God. God's will and counsel on the one hand, and man's freedom and responsibility on the other, may not be presented as two parallel lines extending infinitely on the same plane, or as two tracks that never meet. Even though we may not be able to fathom this relation completely, Scripture teaches us very plainly that it is a relation of dependency: even as a moral agent man is utterly dependent on the sovereign will of God, Who executes all His good pleasure even through the moral deeds of man, both good and evil.

2. Man's voluntary determinations as to their ethical character are subjectively determined by the ethical state of condition of his nature. It is this that is denied by Pelagianism. According to it either good or evil consists only in the act, and the will as such, or man's moral nature can never be either good or bad essentially. But Scripture teaches differently. A good tree brings forth good fruit; a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit. And this has always been taught by Reformed scholars. From an ethical viewpoint the heart is the center of man's being. But it is not in man's power to make his heart good.

3. The natural man's nature is wholly corrupt. Hence, he can never will to do good. He is incapable to think or to will and to do that which is good. He is "free to sin." With him is only the *posse peccare*. In this state he surely can never assent to the gospel, or even will to receive the grace of God in Christ. This does not render him passive, so that he is not a moral agent, responsible for his determinations and acts. He loves evil, chooses sin, and rejects Christ as a conscious moral agent. He is not a stock and block. He is much worse. A stock and block cannot morally react. The natural man can only so react upon the preaching of the gospel that he always rejects Christ.

4. It is almighty, efficacious, irresistible grace only that changes man's corrupt nature, and makes him a new man in Christ. And it is only when the tree is thus made good that it can bring forth good fruit. Only when this operation of grace has been accomplished in man's nature can he will the good, and can he hear and receive the gospel unto salvation. But again, this operation of almighty grace, whereby man's nature is fundamentally changed, does not

make God the subject of his actions or obedience, and does not render man passive. On the contrary, through that grace he now becomes active to do good. He repents, he believes, he embraces Christ, he fights against sin, he walks in all good works. It is God that worketh within him to will and to do of His good pleasure; therefore he is able to work out his own salvation.

Such is the view always maintained by us.

And it is, to the best of my knowledge, the teaching of Scripture, and the view of all Reformed people.

Nor is there another side to this truth.

H.H.