

# Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian”: Re-Reading Cornelius Van Til’s Reformed Apologetics in light of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*

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## INTRODUCTION\*

As a Presbyterian it is a special pleasure to be with you here in the cradle of Presbyterianism in order to reflect upon the relationship between Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) and one of his American Presbyterian proteges—Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). After providing a few introductory remarks on Van Til’s neo-Calvinist heritage, I will summarize his basic attitude toward Bavinck’s theology and provide a snapshot of how the English translations of Bavinck’s works have influenced the perception of Bavinck’s influence upon Van Til in recent scholarship. I will then adduce three lines of evidence which, when taken together, suggest

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that Bavinck’s theological influence upon Van Til is pervasive. Finally, I will conclude with a brief analysis of Van Til’s appropriations of Bavinck’s thought and some reflections on the future of Van Til studies.

## Van Til’s Neo-Calvinist Context

I have called Van Til an “American Presbyterian,” but his heritage is more Dutch Reformed than Presbyterian.<sup>1</sup> As a Dutch-American immigrant, Van Til grew up in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), completed his undergraduate studies at Calvin College, and attended Calvin Seminary for a year before matriculating at Princeton. While at Princeton his favorite professor was a fellow Dutch-American immigrant and former Calvin Seminary professor—Geerhardus Vos.<sup>2</sup> Upon finishing his

1. The following biographical sketch is based on John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*, American Reformed Biographies (P&R, 2008), esp. chs. 1–3; cf. William White Jr., *Van Til, Defender of the Faith: An Authorized Biography* (Nashville and New York: Thomas Nelson, 1979); John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 19–37; Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 7–20.

2. On the scholarly affinities and strong personal relationship between Van Til and his favorite professor—Geerhardus Vos—see Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 51, 72; Edmund P. Clowney, “Preaching the Word of the Lord: Cornelius Van Til, VDM,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 46, no. 2 (1984): 235, 246; *idem*, “Professor John Murray at Westminster Theological Seminary,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries; Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 38–39; William D. Dennison, “Analytic Philosophy and Van Til’s Epistemology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 51–56; William Edgar, “Introduction,” in *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 12; John M. Frame, “Systematic Theology and Apologetics at the Westminster Seminaries,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries; Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 96; *idem*, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1976), 319–20; *idem*, “Cornelius Van Til,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 157; Richard B.

academic training, Van Til pastored for a year in the CRC. He turned down four job offers to teach at Calvin College and Seminary, including one offer to succeed his former systematics professor, Louis Berkhof.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, although Van Til's academic career played out in a predominantly Presbyterian institution (Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia), his primary theological heritage is Dutch Reformed.

It is impossible, however, to reduce Van Til's theological pedigree to one tradition.<sup>4</sup> He himself admits that a panoply of philosophical and theological tributaries flow into his thought,<sup>5</sup> and

Gaffin, Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 103; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 35–36, 45, 48; David VanDrunen, "A System of Theology? The Centrality of Covenant for Westminster Systematics," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries; Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 204; William D. Dennison, *Paul's Two-Age Construction and Apologetics* (Lanham, MD, London: University Press of America, Inc., 1985), 92–94; *idem*, "The Eschatological Implications of Genesis 2:15 for Apologetics," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 203; Charles G. Dennison, *History for a Pilgrim People: The Historical Writings of Charles G. Dennison*, ed. Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2002), 73–77, 121n25, 217–18.

3. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 155–60; cf. James Daane, *A Theology of Grace: An Inquiry Into and Evaluation of Dr. C. Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 16n1.

4. E.g., Van Til published apologetic critiques against modern developments both in American Presbyterianism and in the *Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland*. See Cornelius Van Til, *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1967); *idem*, *The New Synthesis Theology of the Netherlands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1975).

5. E.g., in the "Introduction" to his *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), n.p., Van Til presents the following long list of theological and philosophical influences: Charles Hodge, James Henly Thornwell, Robert L. Dabney, William G. T. Shedd, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, Herman Dooyeweerd, and G. H. Stoker. Later on Van Til adds B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos to the list (p. 20). On Van Til's appropriation of Dooyeweerd's and Vollenhoven's

many of these streams remain uncharted waters in Van Til scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he explicitly identifies Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck as predominant influences. “Wanting to follow the Reformers,” writes Van Til, “it was natural that I read and appreciated the works of those who before me likewise attempted to do so. I first used the works of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, referring to his book, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, Van Til admits that “what has been advocated in this work has in large measure been suggested by Kuyper’s thinking.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Van Til comments on his own

interpretation of the history of philosophy, see pp. 50–51. Cf. *idem*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 13.

6. William Edgar, e.g. in Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 57n4, makes the following editorial comment: “The full story of Van Til’s relationship to the Amsterdam philosophy, and especially to Herman Dooyeweerd, has not yet been told.” (On Van Til’s complicated relationship with Dooyeweerd, see Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 18–19, 48–52; John M. Frame, *The Amsterdam Philosophy: A Preliminary Critique* (Pilgrim Press, 1972), 37–39). Likewise, Charles G. Dennison notes that Van Til’s relationship to Kuyper needs more study (*History for a Pilgrim People*, 136n54). Furthermore, few studies attempt to analyze Van Til’s appropriation of his self-named Reformed predecessors at any length. Owen Anderson, however, devotes a chapter to Van Til’s critiques of B. B. Warfield (see *Benjamin B. Warfield and Right Reason: The Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), ch. 4), and Brian G. Mattson evaluates Van Til’s critiques of Bavinck (“Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (2008): 111–27).

7. Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1971), 8–9; cf. *ibid.*, 11; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 34–36. Van Til’s self-reflection upon his long academic career begins as follows: “In my days at Calvin College and Seminary I read Kuyper and Bavinck assiduously and followed them through thick and thin” (Cornelius Van Til, “The Development of My Thinking,” *A Letter To John Vander Stelt*, 1968; Reproduced in Eric D. Bristley, *A Guide to the Writings of Cornelius Van Til 1895–1987* (Chicago: Olive Tree Communications, 1995), 14).

8. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 233–34.

apologetic method, asking, “And have I, following such a method, departed radically from the tradition of Kuyper and Bavinck? On the contrary I have learned all this primarily from them.”<sup>9</sup> In terms of dogmatic influences, therefore, the Dutch neo-Calvinist stream is a prominent—if not the *most* prominent—tributary flowing into Van Til’s thought.<sup>10</sup>

## Van Til’s Preeminent Esteem for Bavinck

Within this neo-Calvinist tributary, Van Til accords Bavinck the place of preeminence. He esteems Bavinck’s *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* as “the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times.”<sup>11</sup> His scholarly

9. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 301; cf. similar remarks in *idem*, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1972), 155–56; *idem*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 13; *idem*, *The New Synthesis*, 30.

10. K. Scott Oliphint, “Forward,” in *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), ix-x, asserts the following: “To understand Van Til’s contribution to Reformed apologetics, one needs to see not simply his criticisms of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Warfield, but, more importantly, the ways in which he was able to take the best of these Reformed theological giants and incorporate their theological insights into his own apologetic methodology.” *Idem*, “Appendix: Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 295n45, similarly asserts: “The Dutch influence of Van Til could arguably be the most significant influence that has contributed to his Reformed apologetic.” William Edgar, moreover, in editorial comments throughout Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, observes the following: Kuyper was Van Til’s “mentor” (320n4; cf. 17N7), and Van Til pervasively appropriated Bavinck’s doctrine of God (5, 29n8, 89n1, 319n1, 323n8, 335n33, 341n53, 353nn12, 14, 354n20, 369n1).

11. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 89; cf. *ibid.*, 29; *idem*, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 44; *idem*, *The New Synthesis*, 37; *idem*, Appendix 2 in White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 225; *idem*, *The Sovereignty of Grace: An Appraisal of G. C. Berkouwer’s View of Dordt* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1969), 27; *idem*, *The Theology of James Daane* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959), 92; *idem*, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, In *Defense of Biblical Christianity* 1

interaction with Bavinck’s thought began early on in his academic career and continued throughout;<sup>12</sup> accordingly, nearly 1,200 references to Bavinck’s name pervade Van Til’s publications.<sup>13</sup> It is no wonder, then, that Van Til admits that he is “greatly indebted to the great Reformed dogmaticians of modern times, such as Charles Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, Shedd, Kuyper *and especially Herman Bavinck.*”<sup>14</sup>

(Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 29; *idem*, “As I Think of Bavinck,” *International Reformed Bulletin* 9, no. 27 (1966): 19–26; *idem*, “Bavinck the Theologian: A Review Article,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1961): 48–49. Commenting on Van Til’s statement, William Edgar notes, “Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) was a major influence on Van Til. He was perhaps the most significant force in evangelical Reformed theology in the twentieth century” (*An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 89n1). For more on Van Til’s assessment of Bavinck, see Mattson, “Van Til on Bavinck”; Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 56, 115–16. Benjamin B. Warfield, who Van Til counts among his predecessors, provides a similar commendation: “He [i.e., Bavinck] has given us the most valuable treatise on *Dogmatics* written during the last quarter of a century—a thoroughly wrought out treatise which we never consult without the keenest satisfaction and abundant profit” (Benjamin B. Warfield, “Review of Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1901),” *The Princeton Theological Review* 1, no. 1 (January 1903): 148).

12. Van Til’s second academic publication is his review of Bavinck’s *Paedagogische Beginselen* and *De Nieuwe Opvoeding* in the *Princeton Theological Review* 27 (Jan 1929): 135–36; cf. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 10; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 77–78.

13. In terms of raw tabulation (i.e., no differentiation between text and footnotes, etc.) Van Til refers to Bavinck ~1,193 times throughout his collected works, third only to Calvin (~3,413 references) and Kuyper (~1,685 references). His most frequent references to Bavinck occur in the following books: *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 109 references; *idem*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 105 references; *idem*, *The New Synthesis*, 103 references. In light of our thesis regarding Bavinck’s neo-Calvinist influence it is worth noting that Van Til references neo-Calvinist theologians (i.e., Kuyper and Bavinck) much more frequently than he does Presbyterian theologians, such as B. B. Warfield, ~652 references; J. Gresham Machen, ~354 references; the “Princeton Hodges” (i.e., C. W. Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and Charles Hodge), ~312 references; John Murray, ~42 references; and William G. T. Shedd, ~40 references. (NB: All tabulations are based on searches performed within the electronic collection of Van Til’s works (Cornelius Van Til, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til (40 Vols.)*) (Logos Bible

## Bavinck's Influence in Van Til Scholarship

Despite Van Til's copious references to Bavinck, the relationship between the two has been largely ignored in Van Til scholarship. This omission is likely due to the language barrier since Bavinck's *Dogmatiek* was not available in an unabridged English translation until 2008.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the translation, many scholars highlighted Kuyper's influence upon Van Til, but Bavinck's influence was largely neglected.<sup>16</sup> A nascent reassessment of

Software), <http://www.logos.com/products/details/3993>). Attempt was made to avoid duplicate entries by omitting references in the abridged edition of *The Defense of the Faith* when there were corresponding references in the unabridged edition. Also, all references within Bristley, *A Guide to the Writings of Cornelius Van Til 1895–1987*, were omitted.)

14. See "Introduction" in Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, n.p.; emphasis added. Bavinck's significant theological influence upon Van Til was noted in the following studies performed before the English translations of Bavinck's works, yet without elaboration: David Waring Diehl, "Divine Omniscience in the Thought of Charles Hartshorne and Cornelius Van Til: A Systemic Comparative Study" (PhD diss., Yorktown Heights, N. Y.: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1978), 48; Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 20; Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 10; *idem*, "Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC," in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 265; Wesley A. Roberts, "Cornelius Van Til," in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 173–78; Phillip R. Thorne, *Evangelicalism and Karl Barth: His Reception and Influence in North American Evangelical Theology*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1995), 34; James Emery White, *What Is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 36–38.

15. The unabridged English translation of Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* was completed between 2003 and 2008. For a brief history of abridged and unabridged English translations, see John Bolt, "Herman Bavinck Speaks English: A Bibliographic Essay," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 117n1.

16. See Bernard Ramm, *Types of Apologetic Systems: An Introductory Study to the Christian Philosophy of Religion* (Wheaton, Ill: Van Kampen Press,

Bavinck’s influence, however, can be seen in Van Til scholarship subsequent to the translation. For example, in his 2008 biography of Van Til, John Muether describes Bavinck’s influence as follows:

Although interpreters often portray him as a hybrid of Kuyper and Warfield, Van Til himself generally included Bavinck in his list of interlocutors. Indeed, Bavinck is arguably the greatest of all of these influences, the evidence for which grows as Bavinck’s dogmatics is translated into English. . . . [H]e was less concerned with distinguishing himself from these antecedents than with applying their best insights with a rigorous consistency.<sup>17</sup>

Muether argues, furthermore, that one reason Van Til received sharp criticism within Presbyterian circles was a lack of familiarity with Bavinck.<sup>18</sup> Most notably, Muether avers that “Van Til did not so

1953), 184–85, 202–08; Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959), 100, 157–58, 180–83, 206; *idem*, *Van Til*, International Library of Philosophy and Theology: Modern Thinkers Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), 12–15; Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity’s Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 127; Jim S. Halsey, *For A Time Such As This: An Introduction to the Reformed Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 146, 156; Diehl, “Divine Omniscience,” 50–52; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 34–35, 38–48, 60–62, 74, 77–78, 190; White, *What Is Truth?*, 38; Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 20; *idem*, “Systematic Theology and Apologetics,” 91; *idem*, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” 295, 316; Thorne, *Evangelicalism and Karl Barth*, 34; Roberts, “Cornelius Van Til,” 173–78; Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 7–15, 596–600; *idem*, “Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC,” 264–65; *idem*, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Powder Springs, GA and Nacogdoches, TX: American Vision Press and Covenant Media Press, 2008), 21–22; Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 256; Juha Ahvio, *Theological Epistemology of Contemporary American Confessional Reformed Apologetics*, *Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft* 59 (Helsinki, Finland: Luther-Agricola-Seura, 2005), 19–22, 30, 31n33, 37, 297, 322, 322n198.

17. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 56.

18. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 115, writes, “American Presbyterian disquiet over Van Til’s employment of presuppositional reasoning owed, as previously

much create a new apologetic as he refined Bavinck's approach, applying it to modernism, old and new."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Brian Mattson examines Van Til's criticisms of Bavinck in a 2008 journal article and concludes as follows:

Van Til's superficial and at-times uncharitable reading of Bavinck is unfortunate, but not nearly so unfortunate as the impression he gives that Bavinck has more in common with a "traditional" approach to epistemology and apologetics than he has in common with Van Til. If this article establishes anything it is the *deep affinity* in their theological instincts. Van Til never had an intellectual "friend" like Herman Bavinck.<sup>20</sup>

Several recent Van Til studies, moreover, denote the English translations of Bavinck's works among their *raison d'être*.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, with the language barrier removed, Van Til scholars are re-reading the Reformed apologist in light of his predominant dogmatic influence.

#### EVIDENCE FOR BAVINCK'S INFLUENCE UPON VAN TIL'S THOUGHT

Having introduced Van Til's neo-Calvinist heritage, his high esteem for Bavinck, and the reassessment of Bavinck's influence in the latest Van Til scholarship, I will now present three lines of evidence from Van Til's own writings which, when viewed as a

noted, to its unfamiliarity with the Reformed tradition, and especially unfamiliarity with Bavinck. Van Til imported many of his ideas from Bavinck, whose four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* was largely inaccessible to the English-speaking world."

19. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 116.

20. Mattson, "Van Til on Bavinck," 127.

21. Donald Macleod, "Bavinck's Prolegomena: Fresh Light on Amsterdam, Old Princeton, and Cornelius Van Til," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 261–62; Mattson, "Van Til on Bavinck," 111, 127; P. J. Fisk, "The Unaccommodated Bavinck and Hodge: Prolegomena with Natural Certainty," *Trinity Journal* 30 (2009): 107–08.

cumulative case, demonstrate the pervasive influence of Bavinck’s dogmatics upon Van Til’s apologetics.

## Van Til’s Self-Identity as an Inheritor of Reformed Theology

The first line of evidence is Van Til’s self-identity. Van Til’s followers have frequently hailed him as the “Copernicus” of modern Christian apologetics.<sup>22</sup> He has been lauded accordingly with the following Copernican résumé: he is said (1) to have launched the reformation of apologetics just as Calvin launched the reformation of theology,<sup>23</sup> (2) to have created an intellectual revolution,<sup>24</sup> (3) to be the most important theologian since Calvin,<sup>25</sup> (4) to have equaled

22. Oliphint, “Appendix: Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” 280, originally published as “Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” in *Die idee van reformasie: Gister en vandag*, ed. B. J. van der Walt (Potchefstroomse: Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys, 1991); Frame, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” 295; Clowney, “Preaching the Word of the Lord,” 242; Gary North, *Westminster’s Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til’s Legacy* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 20–22. John W. Robbins, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1986), vii, dismisses the Copernican interpretation of Van Til as a “myth”; accordingly, he rejects Frame’s and North’s interpretations (among others) as mythological (*ibid.*, 1–2).

23. Greg L. Bahnsen, “Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” in *Foundations of christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1976), 239; cf. *ibid.*, 233–34; *idem*, “The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 1n2; *idem*, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 7.

24. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 16.

25. John M. Frame, “Backgrounds to My Thought,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 14; *idem*, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2006), 352; *idem*, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 762. *Idem*, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” 295, writes, “[W]hen one considers the uniqueness of his apologetic position and then further considers the implications of that apologetic for theology, one searches for superlatives to

the magnitude of Kant's revolution of philosophy,<sup>26</sup> (5) to have turned apologetics head over heels,<sup>27</sup> (6) to be the only significant advancement in apologetics since Thomas Aquinas.<sup>28</sup>

However, the transformation of Cornelius into "Copernicus" appears oddly hyperbolic when contrasted against Van Til's own modesty and aversion to novelty.<sup>29</sup> In the first place, rather than promoting theological revolutions, Van Til vehemently polemicized against the heterodox "newness" that was appearing all around him. His self-named catalog of opponents includes: Presbyterianism's "new theology,"<sup>30</sup> Princeton's "new modernism" à la Barth and

describe the significance of Van Til's overall approach." Similarly, *idem*, *Cornelius Van Til*, 3, comments, "I have been criticized for using such superlatives to describe Van Til, but I intend to use them again, and to defend that use, in the present volume." At the same time, however, Frame admits that there is a need for a "sympathetic, comprehensive, critical analysis" of Van Til (*ibid.*, 3).

26. Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," 297.

27. Charles G. Dennison, *History for a Pilgrim People*, 120.

28. Oliphint, "Appendix: Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics," 280. Incidentally, the first edition of Avery Dulles' *A History of Apologetics*, Theological Resources (New York: Corpus Instrumentorum, 1971) contains no references to Van Til. The second edition includes three brief references to Van Til (*idem*, *A History of Apologetics*, 2nd ed., Modern Apologetics Library (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), 266, 322, 357).

29. Regarding Van Til's followers, Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 16, writes, "Some of them have made extravagant claims about Van Til and his legacy that would have embarrassed him. Disciples have lauded him as the most creative mind since Immanuel Kant and the greatest Christian thinker since John Calvin. The allegedly innovative features of his apologetic approach have been applauded for their proto-postmodernism and either credited or blamed for distancing both Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church from their American Presbyterian past." William Edgar, "Introduction," in *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 14, likewise asserts the following: "Cornelius Van Til is not the last word on apologetics, nor would he ever have claimed to be."

30. Van Til, *The Confession of 1967*, 1, declares the following: "Should the Confession of 1967 be adopted by that church [i.e., the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America], an entirely new phase in its life will be ushered in. This is true because this proposed Confession gives expression to and

Brunner,<sup>31</sup> modernism’s “new hermeneutic,”<sup>32</sup> the “new evangelicalism” and “new Protestantism” with their “new Christ,”<sup>33</sup> and the “new synthesis theology” from the Netherlands.<sup>34</sup> It is ironic therefore that some of Van Til’s interpreters have been quick to extol their “Copernicus” in terms of the very critique he leveled against his theological opponents—novelty.

In the second place, although he frequently wrote of Kant’s “Copernican revolution” in philosophy, Van Til never applied this

is based upon a new theology. Our concern in this booklet, therefore, is with the nature of this new theology which will be given creedal status if this proposed Confession is adopted by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” Cf. *idem*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 11–12.

31. In a characteristic statement regarding the rise of heterodoxy at his Alma Mater, Cornelius Van Til, “More New Modernism at Old Princeton,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 18, no. 9 (September 1949): 166, exclaims, “Charles Hodge was one of the greatest systematic theologians of modern times. The man about to occupy the chair named after him does not believe in systematic theology at all.” See also *idem*, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972); *idem*, “Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 16, no. 2 (1954): 135–81. Moreover, Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 181, describes Karl Barth’s theology as “the ‘new’ Protestantism rather than historic Protestantism.”

32. Cornelius Van Til, *The New Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1974).

33. Cornelius Van Til, “The New Evangelicalism: Address of Welcome to Students Entering Westminster Seminary,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 26, no. 9 (October 1957): 131–132; *idem*, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* (Nutley, NJ and Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964); Also see the following addresses within the book entitled “The Pamphlets, Tracts, and Offprints of Cornelius Van Til” in *idem*, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til (Software)*: “The New Protestantism—1962” and “The New Christ—1958.”

34. Van Til, *The New Synthesis*, 10, describes this book as follows: “The thesis of this essay is that the change of direction in Holland is one which is marked by a turning away from the traditional Reformed Faith, and toward the reinterpretation (*Umdeutung*) of it in terms of the post-Kantian freedom-nature scheme of thought, and, in particular, of neo-orthodox theology. We shall be concerned chiefly with the new direction so far as it affects theology and, in particular, hermeneutics. But the new direction in theology and hermeneutics involves and presupposes the post-Kantian methodology of science and

description to his own work.<sup>35</sup> To the contrary, following the long tradition of Protestant distaste for theological novelty exemplified by Calvin,<sup>36</sup> Francis Turretin (1623–1687)<sup>37</sup> and Charles Hodge (1797–1878),<sup>38</sup> Van Til insisted that he did *not* build his apologetic *de novo*.<sup>39</sup> He intentionally described himself not as a revolutionary, but as a self-conscious inheritor of “Christianity as interpreted in

philosophy as well. Finally, the new direction in theology is, apparently, effecting a new direction in the ecclesiastical situation of the *Gereformeerde Kerken*.”

35. E.g., Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse and Paul Wooley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1967), 296, defines the term as follows: “Kant’s great contribution to philosophy consisted in stressing the activity of the experiencing subject. It is this point to which the idea of a Copernican revolution is usually applied.”

36. For a classic statement of Protestant “unoriginality,” see John Calvin, “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 9–31. In response to the allegation of theological novelty leveled against the French Protestants, Calvin replies as follows: “First, by calling it ‘new’ they do great wrong to God, whose Sacred word does not deserve to be accused of novelty. Indeed, I do not at all doubt that it is new to them, since to them both Christ himself and his gospel are new. But he who knows that this preaching of Paul is ancient, that ‘Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification’ [Rom. 4:25 p.], will find nothing new among us” (pp. 15–16). Cf. William S. Barker, “The Historical Context of the Institutes as a Work in Theology,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 4–7.

37. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), I:xlii, writes: “Let other books, then, be commended by their novelty. I do not want this statement to justify mine. I avoided it most diligently lest it should contain anything new, a stranger from the word of God and from the public forms received in our churches, and nothing is built up there that is not confirmed by the vote of our most proven theologians of highest reputation.”

38. D. G. Hart, “Systematic Theology at Old Princeton Seminary: Unoriginal Calvinism,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries; Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimble*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 3–4.

the Reformed creeds, as championed by Kuyper, Bavinck, Hodge, Warfield and Machen.”<sup>40</sup>

## Van Til’s Placement of Apologetics in Theological Encyclopedia

The second line of evidence serves primarily as a conduit between the first and third, yet it is also significant in its own right, namely, the relationship between apologetics and systematic

39. Van Til, “My Credo,” 11, writes, “Seeing, therefore, the failure of even Reformed theologians and apologists in their efforts to defend consistently the self-attesting Christ of Scripture, it became clear to me that new ground work needed to be done. I did not, however, undertake this task *de novo*. I learned much from other men, just as I did in theology from Kuyper and Bavinck.”

40. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 276. Similar self-descriptions by which Van Til aligns himself behind the classic modern Reformed theologians abound in his writings. E.g., *idem*, *The Defense of the Faith*, 103, asserts the following: “It is on the basis of the work of such men as Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, and B. B. Warfield, to mention no others, that we have formulated the broad outline of the Reformed life-and-world view. It is only by the help of such men that we have been enabled to attain to anything like a consistent Protestantism.” *Idem*, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 23, further describes his reliance upon Reformed theologians as follows: “The greater part of what is presented here is due to the fact that the writer stands on the shoulders of the great Reformed thinkers mentioned above. He is merely gathering together the thoughts found over a widely diversified body of their writings in order to present briefly that which basically they have taught.” The theologians “mentioned above” include “the great Reformed dogmaticians of modern times, such as Charles Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, Shedd, Kuyper and especially Herman Bavinck. Back of all of them stands that master theologian and exegete of Scripture, John Calvin, whose writings have been constantly consulted” (see “Introduction,” n.p.; cf. *ibid.*, 254). “It is to this basic approach,” Van Til similarly remarks, “of Kuyper and Bavinck, of Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos (ignoring or setting aside the remnants of the traditional method that is found in their works) that appeal is made in this work” (*ibid.*, 20). Cf. *idem*, *Christian Apologetics*, 57n4, 101, 107n33, 115; *idem*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 5–7, 13, 29n8, 70, 89, 89n1, 112n15, 320n4; *idem*, *The Defense of the Faith*, 2, 23–24, 27, 27n1, 103, 113, 143n43, 237, 264, 276, 284, 382, 395; *idem*, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 33–34; Bahnsen, “Socrates or Christ,” 234; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 34–36; Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 56.

theology in Van Til's thought. In *Christian Apologetics* he explains this relationship as follows:

It is apparent from our discussion so far that systematic theology is more closely related to apologetics than are any of the other disciplines. In it we have the system of truth that we are to defend.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* Van Til argues that systematics arranges the fruits of exegesis and biblical theology "into a concatenated system" and that apologetics then defends and vindicates this system "against false philosophy and false science."<sup>42</sup>

In *The Defense of the Faith*, moreover, Van Til presents the relationship in similar terms yet again. Before one can defend the faith, he reasons, one must first know the faith that is to be defended. He thus avers that apologetics must receive its statement of faith from the other theological disciplines, especially systematic theology, before it can defend that faith.<sup>43</sup> He cites the work of his

41. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 23.

42. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 17; cf. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), IX:51, 93. Van Til's use of Warfield's language (i.e., a "concatenated system") is intentional; for, even though Van Til rejects Warfield's position regarding the place of apologetics in theological encyclopedia and prefers Kuyper's view instead (*pace* K. Scott Oliphint's editorial note in Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 352n27), he attempts nonetheless to incorporate insights from Warfield's view in order to prove his own Presbyterian credentials. For Van Til's explications of the so-called "Old Princeton vs. Old Amsterdam" debates, see Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 345–82. (At 345n1 Van Til notes that most of this chapter recapitulates material from ch. 8 in *idem*, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 221–54. In this latter work Van Til further remarks that his argument presupposes the material found in *idem*, "Nature and Scripture.")

43. Johannes Heinrich August Ebrard, *Apologetics; Or The Scientific Vindication of Christianity*, trans. William Stuart and John Macpherson, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886), 2–3, presents a similar argument: Christian apologetics is not the science of defense *in abstracto*, but the defense of its concrete object, namely, Christianity.

former professor, Louis Berkhof, as an example of the Reformed system of faith.<sup>44</sup>

To summarize Van Til’s position, apologetics relates to systematic theology as the scout relates to the general—the former receives his battle plans from the latter.<sup>45</sup>

This position has obvious implications for how he views his task as an apologist. “I have never been called upon to work out any form of systematic theology,” asserts Van Til. “My business is to teach Apologetics. I therefore presuppose the Reformed system of doctrine.”<sup>46</sup> Leaving aside the obvious question which presents itself here—whether Van Til at times acted more as a theologian than an apologist<sup>47</sup>—his stated job description raises a simple practical question in light of his formulation of the relationship between apologetics and systematics: if Van Til is not a theologian, then whose system of doctrine does he presuppose for his own apologetics? This question leads into our third line of evidence.

## Van Til’s Appropriations of Bavinck’s Thought

In the preface to *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* Van Til makes a modest statement regarding his reliance upon earlier theologians. “My indebtedness,” he writes, “to such former

44. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 28–29.

45. I am summarizing Van Til’s own martial metaphors—the messenger boy, the scout, the big guns and little guns, etc.—which he uses to describe the relationship between apologetics and systematics. See Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 18–23; *idem*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 18–19.

46. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 27.

47. So Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 299; *idem*, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” 295–300. Likewise, Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 15, argues that Van Til is at least as much of a theologian as an apologist, if not more the former than the latter. An outstanding example of Van Til’s own creation of new theological formulations is his idiosyncratic formulation of the doctrine of the trinity as “one person” and “three persons.” See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 363–68, 363n45; cf. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 65–71; Lane G. Tipton, “The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004).

Reformed theologians as Louis Berkhof and, back of him, Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper, is apparent throughout.”<sup>48</sup> A comparison of Van Til’s work with Bavinck’s and with Berkhof’s writings, however, reveals that his passing comment is significantly understated; for, throughout the book he appropriates extensive amounts of Bavinck’s and Berkhof’s works, sometimes paraphrasing them, other times copying them thought-for-thought, word-for-word, frequently without citation.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, he appropriates Bavinck’s thought in the following three ways.

First, Van Til explicitly references Bavinck’s name nearly 100 times. In chapters 2 and 3, for example, Van Til admits that his thoughts on Christian epistemology are a summary of Berkhof’s and Bavinck’s more detailed presentations of theological *principia*.<sup>50</sup> In chapter 5, Van Til again summarizes Bavinck’s formulations of theological *principia*, even translating two passages from Bavinck’s *Dogmatiek* into English before criticizing Bavinck’s alleged inconsistencies.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Van Til begins chapter 6 by summarizing Bavinck’s historical analysis of conceptions of revelation.<sup>52</sup> In chapter 15, moreover, Van Til’s discussions of innate

48. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 13.

49. William Edgar, in the “Introduction” to Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 5, writes, “The last chapters on the doctrine of God follow Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* rather closely.” However, Van Til follows Bavinck closely not only in the latter chapters but throughout the book. For example, his first explicit appropriation of Bavinck’s thought is found in ch. 2 (pp. 29ff.), which Edgar himself notes (29n8, 70n32). I am choosing to omit Kuyper in the following analysis since Van Til only references Kuyper tangentially and does not appropriate his writings to the same extent as he does Berkhof’s and Bavinck’s. For Van Til’s explicit references to Kuyper, see pp. 17–18, 50–55, 349n3; Pp. 379–85 are possibly an implicit appropriation of Kuyper’s thought (cf. Edgar’s editorial note, 379n36). On Berkhof’s appropriation of Bavinck’s thought, see note 74 below.

50. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 29–30, 70.

51. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 89–91. For an analysis of Van Til’s criticisms herein and elsewhere, see Mattson, “Van Til on Bavinck.”

52. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 117–18, 118n4. Cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes regarding Van Til’s appropriation of Bavinck’s thought at 118nn4–6 and 119n10.

and acquired knowledge of God are prefaced with the assertion that if we begin with Bavinck’s view then “we cannot go far wrong,”<sup>53</sup> and his entire treatment of these topics is a critical discussion of Bavinck’s formulations. Additionally, in chapters 16 and 18 Van Til’s explications of God’s incommunicable<sup>54</sup> and communicable<sup>55</sup> attributes are largely summaries of Bavinck’s formulations.<sup>56</sup> Even in Van Til’s discussion of the trinity in chapter 17, which incorporates a wider compendium of theologians than his other chapters,<sup>57</sup> Van Til nevertheless gives Bavinck the predominant theological voice.<sup>58</sup>

Second, in addition to these extensive explicit references, Van Til tacitly appropriates large amounts of Bavinck’s thought especially in his chapters on the doctrine of God. For example, in chapter 10 Van Til’s presentation of “the names used to indicate special revelation” and “the modes of special revelation”<sup>59</sup>—nearly

53. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 310, 314.

54. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 323–47. Van Til explicitly references Bavinck’s *Dogmatiek* throughout this section at 323n8, 327nn15–16, 333n27, 334nn28–30, and 335n31. Cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes regarding Van Til’s appropriation of Bavinck’s thought at 335nn32–33 and 341n53.

55. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 369–97. Van Til explicitly references Bavinck’s *Dogmatiek* throughout this section at 370n3; 371nn4–5, nn8–9, n11; 372nn12–13; 373n17; 377n29; 378n32; and 388n50. Cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes at 369n1, 371n10, 374n19, 375n23, 377n28, 378n33, 379n36, 385n40, 386n43, 388n49, 390n54, 391n56, 392n57, 394n63, and 396n66.

56. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 110–37, 148–255.

57. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 348–68; Note Van Til’s references to Kuyper (349n3), Berkhof (350n5), A. A. Hodge (351n7), W. G. T. Shedd (352n9), Calvin (352n10), B. B. Warfield (352n11, 360n34, 361nn35–38), Charles Hodge (355n23, 357n27).

58. See Van Til’s references to Bavinck at 353n12, 354nn17–19, 355n21, 362n42, 363n43, 364n46; cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes at 348n1, 349n4, 353n12, n14, 354n20.

59. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 202–22.

20 pages of material—is a close synopsis of Bavinck’s longer treatment of the exact same topics, yet without citation.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Van Til’s discussion of the names of God in chapter 16<sup>61</sup> is a virtual reproduction of Bavinck’s presentation, again without citation.<sup>62</sup>

Third, beyond explicit citations and tacit appropriations, several of Van Til’s apologetic motifs derive from Bavinck’s thought. For example, Van Til’s programmatic statement regarding humanity’s epistemological duty to “think God’s thoughts after him”<sup>63</sup> is rooted in Bavinck’s assertion that “a theologian’s sole responsibility is to think God’s thoughts after him and to reproduce the unity that is objectively present in the thoughts of God and has been recorded for the eye of faith in Scripture.”<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Van Til’s programmatic

60. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 324–39; cf. Louis Berkhof, *Introduction To Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 133–36. *Contra* William Edgar’s assertions in Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 202n33, 204n35, 204n37, 205n39, 212n59, 216n69, that Van Til is appropriating materials from B. B. Warfield and Berkhof: (1) Warfield himself lists Bavinck as among his sources (Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin Brekinridge Warfield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; Repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 1:32–34); (2) Van Til’s list of Hebrew and Greek words, including the proof texts, is *exactly* the same as Bavinck’s; (3) Van Til’s entire ch. 10 follows Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* closely. Edgar therefore fails to see that both Warfield and Berkhof are themselves appropriating Bavinck’s material.

61. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 319–22; cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes regarding Van Til’s appropriation of Bavinck’s thought at 319nn1–2.

62. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:137–47; cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 48–51.

63. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 292, 364, 376, 387; cf. *idem*, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 16; *idem*, *Christian Apologetics*, 77, 131, 140, 172; *idem*, *The Defense of the Faith*, 124, 130, 151, 329; et al.

64. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:44; cf. *ibid.*, 588. James Eglinton, “Bavinck’s Organic Motif: Questions Seeking Answers,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 51–52, notes that Bavinck’s dictum reflects the wider organic motif underlying his thought, a motif which posits Christ as the center of all history. The fact that Van Til praises Bavinck’s dictum but criticizes Bavinck for being inconsistent with it provides further warrant for viewing Van Til’s

insistence that the ontological trinity is the necessary presupposition of all predication<sup>65</sup> is adumbrated—according to Van Til’s own evaluation—in Bavinck’s critique of the followers of Berkouwer whom he labels as the “*Cahiers* men.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, given his praise of “the analogical system of Bavinck” in opposition to Aquinas,<sup>67</sup> Van Til’s repeated insistence that humans can only know God *analogically*<sup>68</sup> is likely a recapitulation of Bavinck’s formulations regarding analogical knowledge of God.<sup>69</sup> Also, Van Til’s seemingly odd statements regarding the epistemological necessity of circular reasoning<sup>70</sup> are recapitulations of Bavinck’s formulations regarding the circularity inherent in theology’s

formulations as a recapitulation of Bavinck’s; See, e.g., Cornelius Van Til, “Review of *Paedagogische Beginselen*, Dr. H. Bavinck, Derde Druk (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928) and *De Nieuwe Opvoeding*, Dr. H. Bavinck, Tweede Druk, (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928),” *Princeton Theological Review* 27 (1929): 135–36.

65. E.g., Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 59, writes, “Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition”; cf. *ibid.*, 13, 80–81, 124, etc.

66. Van Til, *The New Synthesis*, 94.

67. Van Til, *The New Synthesis*, 37–40; quote at p. 40.

68. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 31–44, 63, 97, 116, 177–85, 274, 279, 292, 294, 298, 328, 373–75, 381, 384, 393.

69. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:47–52, 70, 107–111, 121, 130, 131, 134, 136, 137, 186; cf. Diehl, “Divine Omniscience,” 50. Michael S. Horton, “Consistently Reformed: The Inheritance and Legacy of Van Til’s Apologetic,” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 131–148, argues that Van Til inherited the Creator-creature distinction and its correlate, analogical reasoning, “from the Amsterdam school” (p. 135); however, he does not note that it is from Bavinck specifically that Van Til appropriates the phrase “thinking God’s thoughts after him” nor that it is from Bavinck and Berkhof specifically that Van Til appropriates the language of theological *principia*.

70. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 242–44; *idem*, *Christian Apologetics*, 130; *idem*, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 33; *idem*, *The Defense of the Faith*, 123, 314–26.

*principia*,<sup>71</sup> especially as these formulations are summarized by Berkhof.<sup>72</sup>

On the basis of these three types of appropriations clearly evident throughout Van Til's *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, the answer to our question—From whom does Van Til the apologist receive his statement of the Reformed faith?—is largely Herman Bavinck.

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

Van Til's extensive appropriation of Bavinck's thought is not surprising when the following pieces are put together: (1) Van Til identified himself as an inheritor of Reformed theology, not an innovator; (2) His view of theological encyclopedia necessitates that apologetics receives its statement of faith from systematics; (3) He defined himself as an apologist, not a dogmatician; (4) He esteemed Bavinck as the greatest of the modern Reformed theologians. Ergo, on his own terms it makes sense that Van Til would frequently appropriate materials from the dogmatician who had produced "the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times."<sup>73</sup>

Neither is Van Til's extensive appropriation of Bavinck's thought novel. In fact, Van Til could be viewed as simply following the example of his own teacher, Louis Berkhof, who appropriated Bavinck's theology even more pervasively than did Van Til.<sup>74</sup>

71. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:253, 455–59, 581–600.

72. Pace Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 301–09, and Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 143n144, 170n42, 201–02, 214n116, 218n128, 284–85, 482–83, 518n122, both of whom attempt to analyze Van Til's formulations regarding circularity without comparing Berkhof's and Bavinck's formulations, Van Til virtually repeats the formulation of Berkhof, *Introduction To Systematic Theology*, 125–26.

73. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 89.

74. Henry Zwaanstra, "Louis Berkhof," in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI:

Furthermore, Bavinck’s neo-Calvinist theology casts a large shadow over Reformed theology on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>75</sup> In addition to Van Til and Berkhof, Bavinck’s influence can be clearly seen in the writings of B. B. Warfield,<sup>76</sup> Gerrit Berkouwer,<sup>77</sup> Anthony Hoekema,<sup>78</sup> Herman Hoeksema,<sup>79</sup> Gordon Spykman,<sup>80</sup> Carl Henry,<sup>81</sup> John Frame,<sup>82</sup> and Van Genderen and Velema.<sup>83</sup> Also, several recent studies investigate Bavinck’s influence upon Karl Barth,<sup>84</sup>

Baker Book House, 1997), 135–156; originally published as part of a previous book with the same title (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985); see also Richard A. Muller, “Preface to the New Edition of Louis Berkhof’s Systematic Theology,” in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), v–viii; John Bolt, “Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck’s Reception and Influence in North America,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 277; Oliphint, “Forward,” 29n10; Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 49. On the mutual scholarly affinities between Berkhof and Van Til, including an offer by Calvin Seminary for Van Til to succeed Berkhof as professor of dogmatics, see Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 44, 51, 99, 124, 153, 160; *idem*, “The Whole Counsel of God: Westminster and the OPC,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries; Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 227; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 38.

75. That Bavinck’s profound influence has been appreciated in European Reformed scholarship long before the English translation of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* is evident, e.g., in G. C. Berkouwer’s extensive references to Bavinck in *A Half Century of Theology: Movements and Motives*, ed. Lewis B. Smedes, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), originally published as *Een halve eeuw theologie: motieven en stromingen van 1920 tot heden* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1974). “Bavinck died in 1920,” notes Berkouwer, “but the theological issues he raised kept stirring the minds of others” (p. 11). (NB: Berkouwer’s year is a typo; Bavinck died in 1921.) Regarding Bavinck’s transatlantic influence, moreover, John Bolt, “Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam,” 270, remarks that “the history of twentieth century Dutch Reformed theology in The Netherlands and in North America is in significant measure a story of conflicting appeals to Bavinck.”

76. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Are They Few That Be Saved?* (Our Hope Publications, 1918), 45n7; *idem*, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 27–28; *idem*, *The Plan of Salvation: Five Lectures Delivered at The Princeton Summer School of Theology, June, 1914* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1915), 37, 65n48; *idem*, *The*

Geerhardus Vos,<sup>85</sup> the Reformed epistemology movement,<sup>86</sup> and the reception of geology in the Dutch-Reformed tradition.<sup>87</sup> The magnitude of Bavinck's influence is being analyzed more and more as scholars are reading Bavinck in English. Therefore, viewed within the context of Bavinck's transatlantic influence, Van Til's extensive appropriation of Bavinck's thought is slightly less jarring; for, Van Til is one among many American theologians who sought

*Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 1:34, 112; 2:141, 171, 463; 3:39, 280n36, 367; 4:224n180; 5:125, 161n61, 182n115, 263n103, 306n45, 366; 7:297–98, 326n45; 8:385n78, 388n86, 558n214, 569n20; 9:252n20, 256n29, 279; *idem*, "Review of Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1901)"; cf. Henk Van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the Autopistia of Scripture," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 32–43. Hence not one (Berkhof) but two (Warfield and Berkhof) of Van Til's eminent predecessors imbibed large drafts of Bavinck's *Dogmatiek*.

77. Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952–1976).

78. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986); *idem*, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Also note that Hoekema completed two dissertations on Bavinck, including, *idem*, "The Centrality of the Heart: A Study in Christian Anthropology with Special Reference to the Psychology of Herman Bavinck" (Th.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1948); *idem*, "Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant" (Th.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953).

79. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004).

80. Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

81. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1976), esp. vols. 2, 5, and 6.

82. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*.

83. J. Van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. M. Van der Maas, trans. Gerrit Bilkes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

84. On Barth's critical appropriation of Bavinck's theology, see John Vissers, "Karl Barth's Appreciative Use of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 79–86; Cornelis Van der Kooi, "Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth on Christian Faith and Culture," *Calvin*

to transplant the cream of the neo-Calvinist dogmatics crop into the fields of American Reformed theology.

## CONCLUSIONS

Two conclusions may be drawn from our brief investigation of Van Til’s neo-Calvinist context, his high esteem for Bavinck, the nascent reassessment of Bavinck’s influence in Van Til scholarship, and Van Til’s appropriations of Bavinck’s thought.

First, the Copernican interpretation of Van Til is untenable. Even though his heritage cannot be reduced to one source, Van Til is more accurately interpreted as a neo-Calvinist rather than a Copernican revolutionary insofar as he appropriates extensively from Bavinck’s dogmatics. Likewise, usage of the adjective “Van Tilian” does not accurately reflect Van Til’s own modesty, his aversion to novelty, nor his extensive appropriations of Bavinck’s thought.

Second, even though several recent studies evince a growing

*Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 75–76.

85. On the striking similarities between the lives and thought of Vos and Bavinck, see George Harinck, “Herman Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (April 2010): 18–31; cf. Bolt, “Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam,” 273n50; Edgar, “Introduction,” 3, 12.

86. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Herman Bavinck—Proto Reformed Epistemologist,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 133–46; Alvin Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan Van der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 363–83; *idem*, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

87. D. A. Young, “The reception of geology in the Dutch Reformed tradition: the case of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921),” in *Geology and Religion: A History of Harmony and Hostility*, ed. Martina Kölbl-Ebert, Geological Society Special Publication 310 (London: The Geological Society, 2009), 290, lists the English translation of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* as one of the motivating factors for his study.

awareness of Bavinck's influence upon Van Til's thought, there is much more work to be done. For example, no one has analyzed the extensive appropriations of Bavinck's thought throughout *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Furthermore, Van Til's polemics have not been studied in light of his reliance upon Bavinck's thought, despite the fact that Van Til uses Bavinck's dogmatics as the primary theological criterion by which he (1) vehemently rejects Barth's theology, (2) criticizes Berkouwer's later theology as a devolution from Bavinck to Barth, and (3) polemicizes against what he terms the "new synthesis theology" of the Netherlands. Similarly, no one has studied Van Til's appropriation of Kuyper's formulations regarding the two kinds of science, nor Bavinck's differences with Kuyper on this point. An analysis of Van Til's idiosyncratic deviations from Bavinck's formulation of the doctrine of the trinity also remains outstanding.

The English translations of Bavinck's works offer Van Til scholars an unprecedented opportunity to re-read the Reformed apologist in light of his primary dogmatic resource. Since Bavinck's pervasive theological influence upon Van Til's thought is undeniable, then, to borrow Van Til's metaphor, the scouts need to report back to the general for a reassessment of the battlefield. Only in this way can an adequate assessment be made of Van Til's presupposition of the Reformed system of doctrine.