

JOHN FRAME AND THE RECASTING
OF VAN TILIAN APOLOGETICS:
A Review Article

MARK W. KARLBERG

1. Introduction

In *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), John Frame offers a sympathetic, yet critical, assessment of a leading exponent of twentieth-century Reformed thought. Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) possessed one of the most fertile and penetrating theological minds of our age – a mind and heart set upon faithfully expounding and defending the Reformed faith. Van Til was an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church whose influence reached far beyond those ecclesiastical walls. As a longtime professor of apologetics at Westminster Seminary, Van Til shaped the thinking of more than two generations of students. The Reformed theological heritage has been greatly enriched by the fruits of Van Til's labors.

Doubtless, the significance of this publication lies in the fact that the book clarifies and expands, at long last, the author's own views for the sake of the wider theological community. Frame regards his mentor and predecessor in the apologetics department as “perhaps the most important Christian thinker since Calvin” (44). Respecting that discipline, Frame's ascription is certainly justified. The author notes that his estimate of Van Til is not meant to suggest that Van Til is “the most comprehensive thinker, or the clearest, or the most persuasive” (47). As we will see, Frame has a number of searching criticisms, practical and theoretical, to make of Van Til's system of apologetic theology. The sharp disagreements between Frame and his predecessor, however, do raise the bigger question whether Frame himself can legitimately be regarded as a faithful expositor and practitioner of Van Tilian

apologetics. Frame's work, in my judgment, marks a *decisive departure* from Van Tilian presuppositionalism. The justification for that conclusion can be presented here only in broad outline.

Frame portrays Van Til as an isolationist, one who in his day was outside dialogue with mainstream Protestantism, liberal and evangelical. The observation is made that Van Til "spent his life in a tiny denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, where there was no one competent to discuss philosophy on his level" (36). This set of circumstances, the author posits, contributed significantly to Van Til's isolation. What Frame fails to appreciate, however, are the historical exigencies facing Van Til and his ministerial colleagues.¹ Frame sees Van Til as essentially a confrontationalist, waging battle from the sidelines. He claims that Van Til was, in a word, a "Machenite." "Van Til from the beginning set himself radically over against theological liberalism and, indeed, against neo-orthodoxy. In fact, he set himself so sharply against these movements that his stance toward them was one of confrontation, not at all one of dialogue" (35). Parenthetically, the two theological schools, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, are blood relations, as Van Til made abundantly clear in his study, *The New Modernism*.²

¹ Frame's reading of ecclesiastical divisions in church history is colored by what he calls the "curse of denominationalism." In *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1991), Frame offers a "post-denominational view" of the church. One of the several (false) premises in this study is Frame's contention that the unity of the church is both spiritual and organizational. "*Denominations themselves*," Frame explains, "are *para-church* organizations . . . set up to govern the church and to carry on much of its ministry" (158, italics his). The main thesis of *Evangelical Reunion* is this: "The church was founded by Jesus Christ, out of his unsearchable love. Denominations were founded by human beings, often for at least partly sinful motives" (42). This assessment of Christian religion and practice is unbalanced and problematic, hardly a sound basis on which to build a doctrine of the church. In particular, Frame's assessment of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is largely negative. He repeatedly speaks of this branch of Christ's church as "tiny" (and therefore suspect). He further describes the OPC disparagingly as a "continuous theological seminar," as a "seminar focused on ecclesiology" (10, 11). (I am not a member of this denomination, so it cannot be said that I am taking personal offense at what Frame has said.) Frame concludes that Christians at present can only accommodate – as best they can – to the sinful ecclesiastical situation in which they find themselves. Unsettling is the question left unanswered by Frame, namely, whether or not Luther's break from Rome was justified.

²Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946.

Frame's criticisms of Van Til do serve to highlight a fundamental difference between the two apologists. Van Til is the uncompromising defender of the Reformed faith, Frame the genteel perspectivalist whose eclectic approach embraces diverse and contrary formulations. A fair, sympathetic assessment of the life and contributions of Van Til (especially from those within the Reformed camp) warrants enthusiastic commendation, not denunciation. (Of course, this does not mean that there is no room for disagreements on issues.) Both Van Til and Machen contributed greatly to the cause of biblical Christianity in this century. Frame acknowledges that Van Til did possess a "gracious and charming" personality (27), yet he has difficulty reconciling these two aspects of Van Til's person – his winsome manner, on the one hand, and his vigorous apologetic defense of Reformed theology and thoroughgoing critique of non-Reformed systems of doctrine, on the other. I fail to see any tension here whatsoever. In my opinion, Van Til practiced well what he taught his students, namely, to engage in Christian apologetic *suaviter in modo* – unapologetically!

To be sure, every generation of Christians bears the responsibility to examine the teachings of the church in the light of the Scriptures and to contend for the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints.³ According to Frame's historiography:

Reformations tend to go through three stages, which may be roughly, but not sharply, distinguished: confrontation, consolidation, and continuation. In the first stage, reformers armed with biblical truth confront a crisis in the church. In the second stage, the insights of the reformers are used as a basis for a thorough rethinking of Christian theology and life. In the third stage, the church seeks to appropriate these insights and apply them to changing situations (40).

Although Frame's analysis of the rise and development of polemical theology in the history of the Christian church in three

³See my "Doctrinal Development in Scripture and Tradition: A Reformed Assessment of the Church's Theological Task," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 401-418.

stages is helpful, this thumbnail sketch is of limited usefulness when applied to individual theologians. Throughout the course of Van Til's career his work reflected *all* three aspects. In terms of Frame's historical schematization the "Machen Reformation" may justifiably be viewed as "confrontation." However, we do a great disservice to our spiritual forebears if we reduce their individual labors – whether those of such vanguard theologians as Van Til or Machen, Luther or Calvin – to that of mere confrontation.

The relatively short history of Westminster Seminary has been characterized not only by this threefold development of doctrine – confrontation with those outside Protestant orthodoxy, consolidation within the Westminster school, and continuation of the theological tradition of Continental, British, and American Reformed theology – but also by bitter and sometimes acrimonious dispute among members of its own constituency (e.g., the controversy surrounding the teachings of Gordon Clark and Norman Shepherd, both of which are addressed by our present author). Current polemical debate within the Westminster school – respecting the doctrine of justification by faith and the twofold covenants, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace – prompts the question: what lasting impact did the "Machen Reformation" have on the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and on the seminary which J. Gresham Machen founded?⁴

⁴That question cannot be finally answered here. See, however, Charles G Dennison, "Tragedy, Hope and Ambivalence: The History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church 1936-1962," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 8/2 (1992) 147-59 and 9/1 (1993) 26-44, and Greg Bahnsen, "Machen, Van Til and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC," *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* ed C G Dennison and R C Gamble, Philadelphia Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986, 259-294 (Strangely, the reader of Frame's critique of Van Til would not have the slightest clue that a sharp difference of opinion existed between Frame and Bahnsen in their respective interpretations of Van Til.)

On the broader theological issues addressed by members of the Westminster faculty, see the paper read at the 45th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Washington, D.C., November 18-20, 1993) by W Robert Godfrey on the topic "Developments in Reformed Theology in the Twentieth Century." Richard Lints' paper for this seminar focused more narrowly on what he called "the progressive covenant" in the thought of J Gresham Machen and John Murray.

The faculties at Westminster in Escondido and Westminster in Philadelphia are separate and distinct. However, both are linked to the same theological heritage of the founding institution, so there is justification in speaking of "the Westminster school" (see further

Frame considers his book to be “a serious, critical, analytical study” (ix). He believes that his work probes “more deeply into Van Til’s thought than have either his traditional friends or foes” (ix). With the exception of the work of Frame’s former colleague and student, Vern Poythress, what distinguishes Frame’s critique from others is his reading of Van Til through the spectacles of perspectivalism. This theological approach, unfortunately, has clouded Frame’s interpretation of the history of Christian doctrine in general and distorted his reading of Van Til in particular. Frame should not be surprised when I lament his omission of discussion of Van Til’s covenant theology, what is actually the warp and woof of his apologetic theology. Frame quotes Van Til in passing: *“covenant theology furnishes the only completely personalistic interpretation of reality”* (59-60, Van Til’s italicizing). There is no elaboration of this crucial element in Van Til’s theological apologetics by our author. Christian theology is, by the very nature of the subject, apologetic in thrust. And the development of apologetical method is decidedly *theological*. Failure to address the role of covenant theology in Van Til’s thought is a serious and glaring omission. In particular, an accurate and balanced critique of Van Til’s thought requires interaction with Geerhardus Vos’ biblical theology, to which Van Til himself was greatly indebted. Frame’s discussion, or rather lack thereof, reflects his low estimate of the discipline of biblical theology.⁵

Godfrey’s article, “The Westminster School,” in *Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985] 89-132). For further analysis of these issues and debate, see my study, “The Search for an Evangelical Consensus on Paul and the Law,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 563-79.

⁵Consult Mark W. Karlberg, “On the Theological Correlation of Divine and Human Language: A Review Article,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989): 99-105, and C. G. Dennison, “Tragedy, Hope and Ambivalence,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9/1 (1993): 42-43.

2. *Framian perspectivalism versus Van Tilian presuppositionalism*

We now turn to some of the particulars in Frame's analysis of Van Tilian apologetic theology. The first is Frame's attempt to make the case that (multi)perspectivalism is consistent with the teaching of Van Til both in terms of theologico-apologetic method and substance of argument. Frame erroneously claims that perspectivalism is implicitly taught by Van Til. In his earlier study, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Frame defines perspectivalism as follows:

the knowledge of God's law, the world and the self are interdependent and *ultimately identical*. We understand the law by studying its relations to the world and the self – its "applications" – so that its meaning and its application are *ultimately identical* (89; italics mine).

Whereas Van Til (and Machen) maintained that doctrine *precedes* life, Frame argues that meaning *is* application. According to Frame, there is no priority between these two: doctrine is life, life is doctrine. At the root of Frame's thought is the supposition that interpretation *is* application. This perspectival understanding of Christian faith and life obscures the Creator/creature distinction so basic to Reformed theology and epistemology. Scripture and interpretation are not identical, nor is meaning identical to application. (What Scripture teaches and how application is made of that teaching in the Christian life are two distinct matters.) Perspectivalism introduces something *altogether new* in the history of Reformed theology. Frame would have us think otherwise:

Strange as all of that may sound to Reformed people, I insist that [my] approach is nothing less than generic Calvinism. It is in the Reformed faith that nature as revelation is taken most seriously. Since God is sovereign and present, all things reveal Him. And it is Reformed

theology that makes the fullest use of the biblical concept of God's image, that man is revelational . . . *I seek only to carry this development one step further* (90; italics mine).

Frame's theological method utilizes modern language philosophy, specifically, Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis. By means of this philosophico-linguistic conception of reality the clarity of biblical revelation founders on the shoals of hermeneutical interpretation. Simply put, Frame's exegesis (his interpretation/application) of Scripture compromises Scripture's own authority. Here lies the basis for Frame's misunderstanding of Van Tilian presuppositionalism.

In the present work the author (re)defines presuppositionalism as "the fundamental religious direction of a person's thought" (201). In this definition Frame substitutes human subjectivism for the objective revelation of God. Contrary to the teaching of perspectivalism, Van Tilian presuppositionalism begins and ends with the self-attesting Christ speaking through the Scriptures, not with the religious self-consciousness (i.e., human experience or the so-called "existential perspective"). According to Van Til, the presuppositions of the Christian faith are not outwardly imposed upon the Scriptures – through the grid of human experience – but rather appropriated by means of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit persuading and convincing believers of the truth of God's Word. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (see Romans 10:17). There is a *logical priority* between doctrine and life, meaning and application. Multiperspectivalism all too readily confounds the objective and subjective aspects of God's revelation. The subtle change introduced by Frame's theological methodology has immediate repercussions throughout the system of doctrine.

3. *Evidentialism Redivivus*

Frame attempts to weave traditional evidentialism into the fabric of Van Tilian apologetics. In so doing, the author ends up confounding reason and revelation. He begins by stating:

We should always seek to prove Christian theism “as a unit.” This means, for example, that we should not separate the “that” from the “what” – trying to prove *that* God exists without establishing *what* God we are talking about. Our argument should never conclude merely that *a* God exists (300).

While rightly eschewing the myth of religious neutrality, Frame nevertheless goes on to defend in apologetic discourse the place of natural theology – arguments from God’s general revelation accessible to believer and unbeliever alike by means of common grace. Frame argues:

It is best to develop a system of arguments that establishes as best we can the truth of the full biblical message. But I do not believe that every apologetic syllogism must conclude with the full richness of biblical revelation. Therefore, I am not scandalized by the fact that Aquinas’s argument for the first mover does not also prove God’s infinity (265).

Further evidence of rationalistic evidentialism is sprinkled throughout the book, especially in the author’s treatment of the history of apologetic thought and Van Til’s place in it. In this lengthy portion of the book, Frame endorses the evidentialist arguments advanced down through the centuries.

Beginning with the early Church Fathers, argues Frame, the foundations for Christian apologetics were soundly laid. Thus, he reasons, many helpful insights can be gleaned from the Fathers in presenting an argument for the Christian religion. Van Til’s critical

analysis of the Christian apologists who preceded him is marred, Frame tells us, by his “overly systematic thinking” (268). Frequently, Frame accuses Van Til of “an enormous logical stretch,” as, for example, when Van Til states that Edward Carnell’s arguments implicitly deny the gospel (295). In each of the cases reviewed by Frame, it is Van Til who loses out to his theological disputants.

4. The Wedding of Arminianism and Calvinism

Frame’s sharpest criticism appears in his discussion of Van Til on the noetic effects of sin. It is here that Frame launches his own program of apologetics, beginning with his critical analysis of Van Til’s fivefold formulation of the Christian “antithesis.” Here Frame outlines his strategy “for reconciling antithesis with common grace” (187). Concerning Van Til’s “extreme antithetical view” on faith and unbelief, Frame remarks:

[I]t would almost seem as if no unbeliever can utter a true sentence. It would also seem as if no communication is possible between believer and unbeliever. Unregenerate man cannot know what the good is, so how can he understand sin and the need for redemption in Christ? Since he cannot know his own nature, and cannot know God, and since truth is one, he literally cannot know anything. But how does a Christian present a witness to somebody who literally knows nothing? And why should we witness? For we can be safely assured that the unbeliever will be quite indifferent to any facts we set before him. Is there any role at all here for common grace to play?⁶ (191)

⁶“Together with many Reformed theologians,” writes Van Til, “[Edward] Carnell believes in common grace. And together with many Reformed theologians, he relies heavily on it in order to find a point of contact for the Christian message with the unbeliever. He militates against the apologetical fundamentalists who think that non-Christians know no truth at all.” Van Til maintains that this approach compromises the Christian message. It unwittingly “identifies common grace with natural theology” (*The Case for Calvinism* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964], 85).

Frame maintains that human reason, aided or unaided by special revelation, is able even after the Fall to attain true, though partial, knowledge. To be sure, that knowledge, insists Frame, needs to be supplemented by the additional truth accessible only through special revelation. But contrary to Frame's position, Van Til contends that human reason is unable to attain any *true* knowledge whatsoever apart from God's regenerating work of grace.⁷ (Van Til also maintains that before the Fall both natural and supernatural revelation are requisite.⁸) To know God, oneself, and the world one must think God's thoughts after him. Since humankind's fall into sin, the salvific gift of regeneration precedes true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. It is folly to search for partial "truths" held by the unregenerate, "truths" which Van Til insists are merely borrowed capital from Christianity. As a disciple of the apostle Paul, Van Til's apologetic method is to preach Christ and him crucified, that which is foolishness to the wise of this world. Biblical apologetics is *confrontational* by its very nature. Recognition of one's spiritual poverty and the vanity of human wisdom is itself a work of God's saving mercy and grace in and through the Word of the gospel. (Of course, Frame knows and believes this. Would that he would *apply* it in his apologetic theology!) What Christian apologetics seeks is the exposé of unbelief, not the concatenation of sundry truths held in common by the regenerate and the unregenerate. The latter is simply the reintroduction of evidentialist apologetics, the mistaken attempt to build the Christian faith upon the foundation of natural theology. Van Til's work had dismantled once and for all this unbiblical construction.

⁷Van Til remarks: "Carnell's use of the idea of common grace already presupposes a reduction of the idea of total depravity. Of course Carnell believes in total depravity. He believes in the whole story of Christianity as told in Scripture. For him there is genuine transition from wrath to grace in history. But again, Carnell is driven to tone down this teaching in terms of his method" (*The Case for Calvinism*, 91).

⁸Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," *The Infallible Word: A Symposium*, third revised printing (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), 263-301.

5. Other Doctrinal Deformations: A Sampling

In this section we consider the use of perspectivalism in Frame's formulation of Christian doctrine. The dangers of this theological novelty are clearly apparent in the author's work. Frame suggests:

I believe that the perspectival approach to knowledge is fruitful in helping us to understand the divine attributes, the persons of the Trinity, the aspects of human personality, the commandments of the Decalogue, the order of the divine decrees, the offices of Christ, and perhaps other matters as well. Understanding these matters perspectively helps us to avoid the rather fruitless arguments about "priority" that have taken place in theology over many years. Is intellect "prior to" will in human nature? Is God's decree to elect a people "prior to" His decree to create them? Is God's benevolence "prior to" His justice? . . . [A]lthough *prior* in theology is highly ambiguous, it has played a large role in the history of theology because, in my opinion, theologians have neglected the option of seeing relationship perspectively (191-92).

In our judgment, perspectivalism is a merging of diverse and contrary interpretations of human knowledge. As a theological system, multiperspectivalism is destructive of what Frame himself calls the "logical structure of the analogical system" (170).

Before turning to the first case in point, a few words about the role of logic in theological understanding are in order. Neither logic nor reason function independently of God's revelation. Both find their legitimacy on the basis of divine truth as revealed to created intelligence. Logic alone, like the bare law of noncontradiction, would undermine the biblical doctrine of the Trinity (as it would any other doctrine of the Christian faith). It is the Word of God that establishes the logical coherence of all truth. That Word (or Speech of God) provides the only meaningful universe of discourse for humankind. Reason and logic are *analogical* of divine thought.

While natural revelation stands as a witness to God and his truth, common grace in the postlapsarian order ensures the meaningfulness of linguistic discourse *as far as it goes*. Van Til speaks of this as the “common consciousness” of humankind. True knowledge is dependent upon the regenerating work of the Spirit of God. Regarding God’s special revelation Van Til insists that “all teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory” (cited by Frame, 159). Truth is what God has revealed it to be. It is received by faith (cf. Hebrews 11:3).

At issue in Van Til’s dispute with Gordon Clark is Scripture’s teaching concerning true human knowledge, God’s incomprehensibility, and the Creator-creature distinction. According to Van Til, man’s knowledge is never *identical* with God’s. The relationship between human and divine knowledge is rather one of analogy. Clark was of a different opinion; true knowledge involved an identity of the two. Frame tells us that Van Til’s critique of Clark’s position (at least at one crucial point in the debate) was nothing less than “preposterous” (109). Had Van Til expended greater effort listening to and understanding Clark fairly, states Frame the perspectivalist, he would have come to see that they were both saying the same thing in slightly different words. Frame states boldly: “I am rather shocked at Van Til’s distortion of Clark’s position. It is plain that Clark did not deny that anything can be known about the mode of God’s knowledge” (110). Repeatedly, Frame accuses Van Til of misrepresenting Clark.

It would have been more helpful if Van Til, like the *Report* [of the study committee of the General Assembly of the OPC], had straightforwardly conceded Clark’s point that there is such common meaning [between God and man]. Van Til’s coyness on the issue confuses matters. It is almost as if he cannot bring himself to accept Clark’s wording on anything at all (111).

Insinuations of calculated misrepresentation bordering on deceit on the part of Van Til are scattered throughout Frame’s critique.

Frame says that Van Til “sticks it to Clark,’ but it does not promote the cause of truth and understanding” (112). He concludes:

We have seen several times in this book how Van Til seems to be at his worst when he interacts with Clark. That suggests to me that the difference between them was not merely theological or academic. But I would not care to speculate as to the precise nature of the problem between them (146).

I do not think Frame needs to say more than he has already said. His point is clear to his readers. In Frame’s thinking the problem lies chiefly with Van Til – that cranky, belligerent controversialist. Frame reasons that

Van Til tended to be at his worst in dealing with rival apologists I do not entirely understand this failing in Van Til. Perhaps personal factors made effective communication impossible among these men. Perhaps, like many creative thinkers, Van Til overestimated his originality and therefore the differences between himself and all other apologists of the past and present. Perhaps Van Til’s vision of Kuyperian and Machenite antithesis illegitimately spilled over into his relations with fellow Christians, even those fellow Christians closest to him in theological commitments and apologetic purpose. To our shame, the fiercest battles, often based on misunderstandings, frequently occur within families. In this respect, I urge readers not to follow Van Til’s example (295-296).

We should not be surprised to read this. How could we have expected anything different, given Frame’s portrait of Van Til in the opening “Introductory Considerations.” Frame does reassure his readers that “Clark and Van Til are together in heaven now. [Adding] I am pleased to announce that they are reconciled” (113). I have every reason to believe that this is so. My only question is whether Frame’s resolution of the Clark-Van Til controversy is

likewise an assured word from heaven! I surely get that impression reading Frame.

Space constraints prevent me from examining closely Frame's reading of Van Til on the doctrine of the decrees (specifically, Van Til's adoption of infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism), except to say that these are not two perspectives on the same matter (as Frame considers them), but rather two distinct interpretations of the relationship between God's eternal decree and its outworking in history. Van Til rightly concluded that the apparent paradox in Scripture respecting time and eternity necessitated that we maintain both positions, infra- and supralapsarianism. That is to say, Van Til held together what was apparently contradictory. God's foreordination of whatsoever comes to pass makes history meaningful; history is the outworking of God's eternal, decreative purpose(s). Finite creatures cannot "logically" resolve the apparent contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Actually, the aspect of paradox (or hyperdox), as Van Til had noted, pertains to all Christian doctrine. Respecting the doctrine of the decrees (specifically, the question of the *order* of the decrees), the aspect of *priority* cannot be so cavalierly dismissed as Frame attempts to do. Particularly troubling is the following statement:

Calvin's argument is that God is the "ultimate" cause of sinful acts, while the wicked themselves are the "proximate" causes. Van Til quotes Calvin and Hodge at length in this connection, and with approval. Although this approach to the problem of evil has some roots in Reformed tradition, I believe it is ultimately unsuccessful. I do not see how God is absolved from complicity in evil merely because his causality is once removed from the event (85).

Here (as elsewhere) Frame parts company with traditional Reformed interpretation.

On a related issue, Frame rejects Van Til's concept of humankind as a "generality," faulting Van Til for alleged failure to take history seriously.

The fact is that the gospel is not addressed to a “generality,” but to particular people. And these people are not merely “as yet undifferentiated,” but are already really under God’s wrath. It is to those actual individuals that the promises, offers, commands, and invitations of the gospel come. And it is to them that God says that he does not desire their death. On this point, Hepp is right and Van Til wrong. Here I believe that Van Til fails, despite his best intentions, to take history seriously (222).

According to Van Til, history is the process of differentiation between elect and reprobate. From the standpoint of divine covenant, humankind at the inception of history is undifferentiated. Immediately after the Fall, the gospel is announced to humankind as a generality. The transition from wrath to grace pertains to individual believers who by faith are translated out of the kingdom of darkness and death into the kingdom of light and life. According to Frame’s interpretation, “particular people,” though under the wrath of God, are neither elect nor reprobate. They *become* elect or reprobate in time. Only on this view, maintains Frame, can history be taken meaningfully. (Historic Reformed theology teaches that we are elect or reprobate *from eternity*.) Van Til argues that the initially undifferentiated mass of elect and reprobate becomes differentiated through time, thereby combining elements of both infra- and supralapsarianism. There is genuine movement in history; but it is the sovereign decree of God that actualizes all that occurs in time and space. Here is mystery, to be sure.⁹

⁹Frame interacts with Gary North’s critique of Van Til on common grace and historical differentiation, agreeing with North at some points, differing at others. Contrary to Frame’s contention, Frame’s doctrine of common grace is at variance with that of John Murray. And as we might expect, Frame’s eschatology is an eclectic mix of the various millennial interpretations. See further, Mark W. Karlberg, “Covenant and Common Grace: A Review Article,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 50 (1988): 323-37.

6. Concluding Evaluation

Frame would have us believe that theologian and apologist Cornelius Van Til lost virtually every battle with his sparring partners. Had Van Til only grasped the perspectival nature of truth, as Frame posits, he would have been spared much personal grief and loss. Not only is Frame's claim false that his theological system and method build on the groundbreaking work of Van Til, but his claim to have obtained Van Til's own approbation and blessing is open to challenge. On that matter there is contrary testimony available. Equally disturbing in Frame's diatribe is the author's promotion of his own theological agenda. Frame has not only misinterpreted Van Til, he has betrayed the precious heritage of Reformed theology. Frame's thinking marks a retrogression, not a progression, in Reformed teaching. Throughout his theological musings, Frame has confused his multiperspectivalism with Van Tilian presuppositionalism. As a result, this book might more accurately be entitled *John Frame: An Analysis of My Thought*.

What the author has chosen from among the secondary literature in the field of apologetics and theology is highly selective. For the specialist, this book will be found lacking in substantive, scholarly interaction with other apologists and theologians. In addition to the work of Vos (noted above), fuller attention should have been given to the writing of such influential Dutch thinkers as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Klaas Schilder, Louis Berkhof, G. C. Berkouwer, Hendrik Stoker, and Dirk Vollenhoven. Frame's subtle and not so subtle barbs directed against his critics serve only to impede meaningful discussion of the issues. Perhaps this is evidence of the author's frustration and impatience with his critics.

Frame blunts the incisiveness of Van Til's evaluation of non-Christian thought, maintaining that Van Til's use of "extreme" antithetical argument and sharp rhetoric was the mark of a "movement leader" – after the fashion of J. Gresham Machen – rather than the mark of a mature, reasoned apologist. Such eccentricity, according to Frame's caricature of Van Til and Machen, detracts from the message as well as the messenger of the

gospel. Frame desires to have the Christian apologist engage in rational argument (*à la* traditional evidentialism). In the final analysis, however, Frame's criticisms of Van Til's apologetics are simplistic and reductionistic. The author has fundamentally misunderstood the *theological* basis upon which Van Til's apologetics is built. How else can one explain Frame's (mis)reading of Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, and Edward J. Carnell (not to mention others like Gordon Clark)? The author's discussion of topics in the history of Reformed doctrine such as the incomprehensibility of God, the divine decrees, and natural theology demonstrates just how problematic his theological methodology is. In place of doctrinal precision there is ambiguity and vagueness, the hallmarks of Frame's multiperspectival approach to Christian teaching. Frame takes exception to Van Til's insistence that credal statement (in the words of Frame) "never be revised in such a way as to 'tone down' specific doctrine into 'vague generalities'" (164, n. 19). Not only does Frame miss Van Til's point, he takes this occasion to suggest that Scripture does not warrant the doctrinal precision and detailed formulation typically found in the confessional and dogmatic statements of the Christian church.

I find it strange that Frame should criticize Van Til for his publishing ventures. He faults Van Til for not submitting his work for review by others outside the narrow Westminster (Reformed?) community. Frankly, in this regard I do not see how Frame's publishing ventures significantly differ from Van Til's. Am I missing something here? What I say is, thank God for the avenues Van Til employed at that time to offset the tide of secularism both within and without the institutional church.

One final comment: the genius of Van Tilian presuppositionalism is not the development of a rational refutation of non-Christian thought – that is, "proofs" for the bankruptcy of secular philosophy or the irrationalism of reason apart from faith and revelation – but rather the presentation of the claims of Christ found in the Scriptures. Biblical apologetics is, simply stated, the

proclamation of the Word of God, the exposition and defense of the Christian faith in the face of pagan unbelief. Writes Van Til:

Christians are not wiser than are other men. They have no information that is not available to other men. But by grace they have learned to see that the self-authenticating Christ is the presupposition for the intelligibility of the scientific, the philosophical, and the theological enterprise. No one has shown how learning by experience is possible by any other method than that which presupposes man and his universe to be what Christ in his Word says it is.¹⁰

We do well to heed the admonition of the greatest apologist of our day, Cornelius Van Til, and abandon all pretense regarding the use of rational argument to justify, validate, or corroborate the thoughts and ways of the Creator to the creature.

¹⁰*The Case for Calvinism*, 148-49.