

VAN TIL AND COMMON GRACE¹

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I. Introduction

During my freshman year in college (Geneva College), I recall the occasion when my philosophy professor, Dr. Peter Steen, entered the classroom and began to tell his impressible students about how he testified for the gospel to a number of young adults on the previous evening. He described how he had immediately gone up to a gathering of non-Christians on the street corner and asked the question, "Does $2+2=4$?" Needless to say, Steen remarked that he received some strange looks from those puzzled intellects. Finally, one remarked, "Yes, $2+2=4$!" Steen told our class that this was exactly the response he hoped to receive. Immediately, he proceeded to ask his puzzled audience on the street corner the epistemological question: "But how do you know that $2+2=4$?" "Because that is the way it is," responded one annoyed intellect. At this point, Steen told our class that he used this opportunity to confront his non-Christian audience with the point that unless one accepts the God of the Bible, one has no true basis on which to accept the mathematical proposition, $2+2=4$. Hence, the non-Christian can only substitute a world controlled by chance for a world controlled by the sovereign God of the Bible.

¹This article is based upon two Reformation Day lectures which I presented to the Presbytery of Ohio (Orthodox Presbyterian Church) in Morgantown, West Virginia, on October 28, 1995. The lectures were given to commemorate the centennial of Cornelius Van Til's birth. The reader should keep in mind that the lectures were delivered for the benefit of the laity; I made every attempt to refrain from the highly technical aspects of the issue. Also, one should keep in mind that the lectures were based solely upon Van Til's volume entitled, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1972) which contains a collection of his articles on common grace from 1947-1968. I used this volume simply to map out the basic structure of Van Til's position to the Presbytery of Ohio. I am aware of other material which relates to Van Til's position. Lord willing, I will write more extensively on Van Til's view in the future. Hopefully this will serve as an adequate introduction.

Steen's point was simple. He wanted the Christian students in his classroom to recognize that nothing can be said to be true unless the God of Scripture exists – the foundation of all true knowledge. Herein, Steen echoed the sentiments of his Reformed teachers, Herman Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven in the Netherlands, and Cornelius Van Til at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA. The sentiments of Steen and his teachers, however, have not found a consensus in Christian (Roman Catholic and Arminian traditions), or for that matter, Reformed circles (Old Princeton tradition). Many Christian and Reformed individuals would view Steen's question about $2+2=4$ as absurd. In other words, it could be said that God's common grace provides for rational analysis and empirical perceptions which are universal for all men. Hence, the mathematical proposition $2+2=4$ is a neutral category, or at best a proposition that exists in the realm of natural or general revelation which must be said to be true without qualification for the non-Christian and Christian alike.

For this reason, one may be compelled to say that the rightful place of common grace is found traditionally among Roman Catholics and Arminian thinkers. Both traditions have accented what all men have in common: the correct use of the rational faculty, the empirical observation of human experience and natural phenomena, and the common comprehension on the part of all men of general and natural revelation. Indeed, it would seem that both traditions would be the heralds of the benefits of common grace as shared by the unbeliever and the believer of the Christian religion. On the other hand, Steen's beloved teacher, Cornelius Van Til claimed that the only rightful place where the subject of common grace could be addressed is in the context of the Reformed tradition. After all, for Rome and the Arminian "it is a foregone conclusion that there are large areas of life on which the believer and the unbeliever agree without difference."²

According to Van Til, the Reformed tradition does not operate upon such a foundation. Rather, in the Reformed tradition common grace is a serious problem in view of her doctrine of total depravity.

²*Common Grace*, 12.

If one holds consistently to the doctrine of total depravity, then man's entire being is in rebellion against his Creator. Hence, how can one speak of anything that man knows as being in alignment with God's thoughts, or that anything man does, as being good? In light of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, it is difficult for its comrades to articulate a position concerning the obvious commonness of certain truths espoused by non-Christians and Christians alike. For this reason, Van Til's writing on the subject of common grace was a quest to be consistently faithful to Scripture and the Reformed Confessions.³

II. Van Til and the Reformed Positions

In order to achieve his goal on the subject of common grace, Van Til placed himself critically in the history of the Dutch Reformed discussion. In reviewing their discussion, he divided her heritage into three camps: 1) the traditional position (Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Valentine Hepp); 2) the denial position (Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof); and 3) the reconstructionist position (Klaas Schilder, Herman Dooyeweerd, D. H. Th. Vollenhoven). In terms of the three camps, Van Til identified himself more closely with the reconstructionist camp, especially Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. One must be cautious here; Van Til viewed the reconstructionist movement as a *broad* movement in theology and philosophy which attempted "to build up the traditional Reformed position while yet to an extent rebuilding it."⁴ In other words, Van Til saw himself as one who built upon the work of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Hepp while assuring the Reformed community that certain reconstructions were necessary in order to enhance a consistent Reformed view of common grace. Hence, the only camp which Van Til wished to have little, if any, identification

³For Van Til, the problem with Old Princeton (the Hodges and Warfields) was that they were not consistent to the Scriptural and Confessional texts. They were more consistent with Roman and Arminian thought on the point of contact between believer and unbeliever in the apologetic enterprise.

⁴*Common Grace*, 23.

was the group that denied common grace (Hoeksema and Danhof). Such an observation is crucial since many critics of Van Til's view of common grace have attempted to label him as a denier of common grace, maintaining that he belongs in the Hoeksema camp.⁵ Nothing could be more disingenuous to Van Til's position. In order to demonstrate this, however, permit me to briefly highlight Van Til's assessment of the three camps so that we can understand his own project on the subject of common grace.⁶

1. The Traditional Position

Van Til proclaimed that he truly appreciated what he called the "traditional Reformed position on common grace." Its three main players were Dutch Calvinists: Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), and Valentine Hepp (1879-1950). By the end of the 19th century, it had become evident that Kuyper had produced one of the main contributions to the Reformed tradition on the subject of common grace – he wrote a three volume set on the topic. Basically, Van Til was pleased with Kuyper's contribution, since Kuyper had placed common grace as well as special grace in relationship to total depravity. What particularly captured Van Til's attention in this relationship was the fact that Kuyper understood common grace as being grounded in God's work in history. Specifically, in the negative sense, common grace is viewed as God's work of restraining man's sinful and depraved

⁵This accusation has been particularly popular among the "progressives" in the Christian Reformed Church and their legacy since the 1950s. One may wish to consult James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 187-203; William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace: A Defense of the Historic Reformed Faith Over Against the Theology and Philosophy of the So-called "Reconstructionist" Movement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953); 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, 1954); John C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, NJ: Mack, 1978), 220-270; and various articles in the *Reformed Journal* from 1951-1956.

⁶Van Til's assessment of the three camps is very complex and technical. I focus on a few areas which serve our purpose.

state through history.⁷ In the positive sense, although man is depraved, common grace is viewed as God's work of enabling man to express his gifts as an image-bearer of his Creator through history (e.g. art, music, thought, etc.).⁸ As Van Til praised Kuyper's negative and positive conceptions of common grace, he did not overlook another contribution from Kuyper's pen which related total depravity and common grace. Kuyper also had placed the interpretation of scientific knowledge in the context of regeneration. Specifically, a distinct epistemological difference exists between the way a person regenerated by the Holy Spirit interprets the world and the way a person who continues in the depravity of his sin interprets the world. Herein, Kuyper was maintaining that the status of the individual's *heart* determines his *holistic* understanding and interpretation of the facts. In this case, the knowledge and interpretation of the facts by the believer and the unbeliever are antithetical to each other.

Hence, an overview of Kuyper's position in respect to the unregenerate seems to convey that God restrains the unregenerate's depravity in history to the point that he makes a contribution in the world. At the same time, the depraved heart of the unregenerate cannot know or interpret the facts *holistically* in a correct manner because his heart is at enmity with God (the exact opposite is true for the regenerate heart). Even so, as Van Til found these contributions vital to Reformed thought, he also found that Kuyper's view of common grace contained some serious flaws.

Van Til maintained that Kuyper's view of common grace was deficient in five areas.⁹ I will focus upon one area in order to give the reader an idea of the problem; specifically, Van Til believed

⁷See *Common Grace*, 15.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Permit me to summarize the five areas. First, it fell into abstraction; remnants of Rome's semi-Aristotelian epistemology remained. Second, Kuyper did not live up to the high ideal of his distinction between the regenerate and unregenerate. Van Til held that Dooyeweerd had adequately shown that Kuyper was too uncritically receptive of modern philosophical statements concerning the universal and the particular. Third, in terms of the classical modern connection on epistemology, Van Til found a continual promotion of Platonic/Kantian epistemology. Fourth, Van Til believed that Kuyper followed Kant's *Ding-an-sich* in relation to the facts. Hence, in the fifth place, Van Til did not find in Kuyper a clear distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian ideal of knowledge. See *Common Grace*, 35-44.

that Kuyper promoted a Platonic/Kantian epistemology. For Van Til, one of the key aspects of this problem is revealed when Kuyper wrote that “our thinking is wholly and exclusively adapted to these (highest) relations [between universal objects], and these relations are the objectification of our thought.”¹⁰ Herein, Van Til maintained that Kuyper’s view suffered from Kantian phenomenalism. Plato said that the distinction between the universals must be placed in the Form world, whereas Kant said that the distinction between universals belong to the categories of the mind and its projections. Kuyper followed this Kantian line of thought, and thus, Van Til claimed that “there is a vagueness inherent in Kuyper’s treatment of common grace. He seems to be uncertain in his mind as to what is common to the believer and the non-believer.”¹¹ What is this vagueness? According to Van Til, Kuyper began with a Platonic/Kantian understanding of the world, i.e., the human mind shapes the world.

For Van Til, such a starting point was a serious mistake; rather, one should start with the ontological trinity of Holy Scripture and say that the relations of the universe are dependent upon thinking God’s thoughts after Him. Van Til referred to his own understanding of epistemology as analogical thinking or knowledge. Hence, from his perspective, Kuyper’s epistemology was based upon the dualism of the human mind and the God of Scripture. It contained a kinship with medieval epistemology.

Turning to Herman Bavinck, Van Til noted that Bavinck wrote a booklet on the subject of *Common Grace* (1894), and that he also addressed the issue in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Concerning Bavinck’s contribution, Van Til appreciated the manner in which he stressed the mystery or incomprehensibility of God as being at the heart of dogmatic theology. Simply, “the revelation of the infinite God to the finite creature . . . cannot be exhaustive of the being of God.”¹² The creature must submit to the mysterious sovereignty of God concerning the unfolding of God’s saving grace to the elect as

¹⁰This quote appears in *Common Grace*, 36.

¹¹*Common Grace*, 40.

¹²*Common Grace*, 46.

well as God's common grace to all mankind. Although Van Til praised Bavinck's concept of mystery, nevertheless, he was not specific about what he appreciated about Bavinck's view of mystery and common grace. Rather, he seemed more concerned with inconsistencies in Bavinck's position. Particularly, he focused upon Bavinck's tendency to speak "as though the concept of the incomprehensibility of God entertained by Christian theology and that entertained by pagan philosophy were virtually the same."¹³ According to Van Til, their similarity can be explained by principles of reason which led Bavinck to a metaphysical and epistemological position of "moderate realism." For Van Til, such a position lost the distinctiveness of a Reformed view of common grace.

In Van Til's eyes, like Kant before him, Bavinck wished to accept the good from empiricism and rationalism, while he rejected the bad from both systems. Bavinck agreed with the rationalists that there are certain rational assumptions about reality which are made by the mind. Unlike the rationalists, however, Bavinck held that those assumptions correspond simultaneously with the perceptions of experience (moderate realism). Herein, Bavinck held that all men are naturally realists. In reaction, Van Til believed that Bavinck's moderate realism pushed him back to medieval scholasticism. Perhaps, Van Til's accusation is best observed in his assessment of Bavinck's position on the theistic proofs for the existence of God. Bavinck held that the medieval arguments for God's existence were weak as proofs but strong as testimonies. They are not to be taken as arguments that compel the unbeliever to believe in God; rather, the believer's faith may accept their testimony to defend himself against the attack of science and solidify the truth of God's revelation in creation.¹⁴ According to Van Til, Bavinck's position on the proofs cannot solidify the testimony of the believer's faith because the proofs are based upon a non-Christian (Greek) conception of reason which leads a person away from the God of the Bible, or at best, to compromise the God

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴See, *Common Grace*, 47, 48.

of the Bible. Without this insight, Bavinck's moderate realism spoke "as though the only difference between the Christian and the non-Christian notions of the incomprehensibility of God were a matter of degree."¹⁵ Both positions would begin with the same realistic view of God afforded to man through the means of human reason and experience (common grace). For example, by virtue of common grace, the unbeliever and the believer share by their conceptions of reason and their perceptions of experience a limited comprehension of the living God. However, by virtue of the Holy Spirit's revelation of Jesus Christ, the unbeliever does not share the additional comprehension of the living God disclosed to the believer. Thus, similar to Kuyper, Van Til thought that Bavinck's view of common grace has kinship to medieval scholasticism.¹⁶

If Kuyper and Bavinck did not adequately upstage the remnants of non-Christian epistemology and its effects upon common grace, perhaps Valentine Hepp could perform the task by placing Reformed epistemology upon the testimony of the Holy Spirit. According to Van Til, Hepp divided the testimony of the Holy Spirit into two domains: the special testimony of the Spirit and the general testimony of the Spirit. The special testimony of the Spirit testifies within us to the truth of Scripture (assures me of the truth of the revelation about me), whereas the general testimony of the Spirit testifies within us to truth in general (assures me of central truths only). The general testimony of the Holy Spirit is of particular interest to the discussion on common grace. According to Hepp, there are three groups of general truths: God, man, and the world. Concerning God, Hepp held that the general testimony of the Holy Spirit presses upon the conscience of all men the theistic proofs. Here, the Spirit does not give absolute certainty, but He does provide a general testimony that enables man to have a general understanding of God. Likewise, man is certain of his own existence by means of the general testimony of the Holy Spirit, and

¹⁵*Common Grace*, 47.

¹⁶Even in light of this problem, Van Til exalts Bavinck for the overall direction of his thought. Van Til wrote, "the Christian must stand with both feet upon the bed-rock of special revelation in his study of nature. That is, we believe, the real position of Bavinck, but he has not been fully true to it" (*Common Grace*, 51).

furthermore, man can only realize that the empirical world around him exists because of the general testimony of the Holy Spirit. In Hepp's construction, the general testimony of the Holy Spirit is the domain of common grace. Although it seems that Hepp has placed an understanding of common grace upon the foundation of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless, when one examines his position more closely, his position remains in the same dilemma which Kuyper and Bavinck had failed to conquer. According to Van Til, his conception of the general testimony of the Holy Spirit is defined by non-Christian conceptions of reason and nature – by modern rational and empirical methods of science. In other words, non-Christian conceptions are defining common grace. Specifically, Van Til claimed that Hepp permitted a methodological construction of the theistic proofs upon a non-Christian view of probable reason, and then, placed it in the context of the Spirit's general testimony. For Van Til, probable reason and any testimony of the Holy Spirit (which is absolute) cannot go together.

Has the traditional Dutch Reformed position on common grace really been able to distance itself from medieval scholasticism and a classical theory of knowledge? Although Kuyper, Bavinck, and Hepp attempted to distance themselves from the scholasticism and classicism, nevertheless, Van Til believed that they never overcame abstraction. That is to say, although they had given God the strategic place in their system – the starting point and foundation of knowing, understanding, and interpreting all things – nevertheless, they permitted the non-Christian to define the terms they had adopted as God's terms. Hence, in the realm of natural and general revelation, God is merely the prelude and the appendix in the structure; rather, according to Van Til, He must be the Being who defines the entire structure. Only in this context is the structure holistic and concrete.

2. *The Denial Position*

Perhaps the denial of common grace is the most consistent alternative within the context of Reformed theology. Possibly, it is the only plausible response against the scholastic-classic synthesis with biblical revelation. In fact, Van Til has been identified with such a position by his critics, especially James Daane and William Masselink in the 1950s. In truth, however, Van Til was more critical of Herman Hoeksema's formulation than any other position within Reformed orthodoxy which he addressed in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. In a famous judicial case in the 1920s which eventually led to his removal from the Christian Reformed Church, Hoeksema (1886-1965) denied the basic tenets of the traditional Dutch Reformed view of common grace. He opted for a position which applied the term, "grace" only to the redemptive work of God in the sinner. Van Til could not agree. He accused Hoeksema of using a non-Christian conception of logic which denied "the possibility of (a) a certain attitude of favor on the part of God to the reprobate and (b) the ability of the reprobate to do good of a sort."¹⁷ Specifically, Van Til criticized Hoeksema for using a non-Christian view of logic as the basis "to 'harmonize' the revealed and the secret will of God, prayer, and the counsel of God."¹⁸ In Van Til's estimation, Hoeksema's use of a Greek conception of logic had reduced the destiny of the elect and the reprobate to a single act of God's will without respect to the activity of God in history. Hence, Van Til believed that Hoeksema's view of the divine will of God leads to absolute determinism; there is absolutely *no significance to a Reformed conception of revelational history*.¹⁹ Moreover, Van Til pointed out that Hoeksema permitted a measure of validity for the medieval scholastic proofs of God's existence; in fact, according to Hoeksema, these proofs stare the non-Christian in the face each day. Since the non-Christian is so depraved, Hoeksema held that the unbeliever will never acknowledge the

¹⁷*Common Grace*, 29.

¹⁸*Common Grace*, 27.

¹⁹See, *Common Grace*, 28, 29.

credence of these proofs. Again, Van Til was disappointed in Hoeksema's position since it admitted that the proofs, built upon the foundation of classical reason, have validity. Only one's depravity prevents their credence for the unbeliever. Hence, Van Til did not find in Hoeksema a clear criticism of non-Christian logic in his critical assessment of the traditional Dutch Reformed understanding of common grace. For this reason, Van Til held that Hoeksema's denial of common grace was based upon a non-Christian foundation.

3. Reconstructionists

As Van Til criticized the traditional Dutch Reformed position on common grace and distanced himself from Hoeksema's denial of common grace, he identified his alignment with the work of Herman Dooyeweerd (1889-1977) and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978). Although he identified himself with their work, nevertheless, he was not very specific about their contribution to his view of common grace. In a vague manner, Van Til suggested that they were the most concrete Dutch Reformed thinkers in the 1950s. By this he seemed to insinuate that they had an integrated interpretation of God's creation, seeing all the creation ordinances subject to God's will. In this construction, the God of the Bible is the necessary presupposition for a correct analysis of the laws of creation. Moreover, Van Til also mentioned that he appreciated their stress upon man's heart as the center of human activity. Like Kuyper before them, both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven maintained that the devotion of one's heart towards Christ or against Christ has an effect upon a true scientific interpretation of the world. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Van Til seemed at peace with these notions. Upon the necessary presupposition of the triune God of the Bible and the effects of God upon the creation and man, Van Til reconstructed the Dutch Reformed position of common grace upon traditional grounds. Herein, he maintained that his Reformed brethren must take into consideration the impact of a holistic understanding of biblical historical revelation as presented in the

Reformed Confessions for a correct formulation of the doctrine of common grace.

III. VAN TIL'S POSITION ON COMMON GRACE

1. Point of Contact and Common Grace

In the marketplace, the subject of common grace and the issue of a common point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever remains a problem when we keep in mind the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. In order to keep a proper balance between common grace, the point of contact, and total depravity, Van Til set forth two ideas which became point of contention on the part of his critics: 1) "the believer and the non-believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation" and 2) the believer and the non-believer have everything *metaphysically* in common, but nothing *epistemologically* in common.²⁰ Van Til's critics respond by saying that he cannot be serious; these two points seem to destroy any conception of common grace and a common point of contact while accenting the notion of total depravity. With respect to the first point, his critics may concede that a basic difference between a self-conscious investigation on the part of a believer and an unbeliever exists concerning an *explanation* of the facts, but there is no such difference in the mere *description* of the facts.²¹ For example, a Christian and a non-Christian go fishing with each other. The Christian catches a bass. Both parties decide to measure the bass; they agree that it is sixteen inches long. Both parties decide to weigh the bass; they agree that it weighs three pounds. Both parties look at the bass; they agree that it is grey, and it has two eyes and a mouth. It is evident, therefore, that the *description* of the bass is the same for the Christian and the non-Christian. On the other hand, if they engage in an *explanation* of the fish, then the two positions are not alike. The non-Christian understands the bass

²⁰Common Grace, 3, 5.

²¹See Common Grace, 3.

as existing in a process of evolution, controlled by the laws of nature in a chance created universe. The Christian holds that the bass is a unique creation of God, which has a distinct purpose in God's created universe. Hence, it should be apparent that the *description* of the bass is the same for the Christian and the non-Christian, whereas the *explanation* is not the same. It is safe to say that most Christians are satisfied with such a distinction. However, Van Til was strongly opposed to this distinction. As we have noted, he held that from the very outset of every self-conscious investigation into the facts, the Christian and the non-Christian differ. Specifically, Van Til maintained that every description is an explanation of a fact – the description of a fact is not a neutral category which exists irrespective of God.²² As Van Til wrote: “according to any Christian position, God, and God only, has ultimate definitory power. God's description or plan of the fact makes the fact what it is.”²³ Since God describes and interprets (explains) the fact, then no fact is neutral. Every *self-conscious* investigation into the facts does not separate description from explanation.

Those who have found Van Til's failure to separate description and explanation repugnant, have also been hostile towards Van Til's position that the believer and the unbeliever have all things *metaphysically* in common, while they have nothing *epistemologically* in common. Herein, Van Til was consistent with the previous point; every believer and every unbeliever is self-conscious of their own view of knowing and interpreting the facts. Specifically, the believer's heart is self-conscious of his dependency upon God in order to define, know, and interpret the facts, whereas the unbeliever's heart is self-conscious of his dependency upon his own human autonomy in order to define, know, and interpret the facts. True, the unbeliever may attempt to claim that his position is dependent upon a system not grounded in himself, e.g., Plato's demiurge creating the world after independent existing entities in the Form world. Van Til would respond, however, that even Plato's

²²See *Common Grace*, 3.

²³*Common Grace*, 5.

system is a projection in his own mind, since it is not based upon the direct revelation of the living God. In terms of one's epistemological self-consciousness, therefore, Van Til declared that the believer and the unbeliever cannot have any fact in common. The epistemological self-consciousness of the two parties are antithetical to each other. On the other hand, Van Til held that the believer and the unbeliever have every fact in common. What is going on here? This position seems confusing; Van Til seems contradictory! Van Til pleaded that a distinction must be made between one's epistemological self-consciousness and the realm of metaphysics. In the metaphysical realm, both parties deal with the same God, who alone exists, and the same universe which is created by God (common point of contact). Moreover, both parties are created in the image of God. For this reason, the believer and the unbeliever can agree that the bass is sixteen inches long and weighs three pounds. In God's created universe, the believer and the unbeliever cannot overlook these metaphysical facts. Even so, in the final analysis, the description of the bass and the explanation of the bass cannot be separated. Or to put it another way, Van Til held that the unbeliever's understanding of God's metaphysical universe is static; he always operated metaphysically in abstraction. He will say that the bass weighs three pounds or that $2+2=4$ (which is metaphysically correct), but he will not describe or explain the truthfulness (epistemological) of the bass or the mathematical proposition in the context of a Christian theistic universe (concrete understanding).²⁴ These Van Tilian phrases become more coherent if we place them more comprehensively within his discussion of common grace.

²⁴The metaphysical correctness of the proposition $2+2=4$ is not based on a neutral view of reason or a classically defined view of reason; rather, the proposition is true only because God has defined the proposition. That is what Van Til declared must be the confession of the Christian.

2. *Van Til and Common Grace*

Already I have alluded to a number of key elements in Van Til's position on common grace: the authority and sovereignty of God, the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, and the idea of abstraction versus the idea of concreteness. The key in Van Til's view of common grace is, however, a philosophy of history set forth on the basis of biblical revelation and taught in the Reformed Confessions.²⁵ This point must not be overlooked; perhaps, more than any other subject he addressed, we witness in Van Til's version of common grace a more consistent application of the biblical theological perspective of his teacher, Geerhardus Vos. Note carefully how Van Til defines the central problem of common grace: "the common grace problem deals with this question: What do entities which will one day be wholly different from one another have in common before the final stage of separation is reached?"²⁶ Following the structure of Vos' interpretation of Pauline eschatology, Van Til understood that the problem of common grace deals with eschatology (it is not a mere logical construction of God's will – Hoeksema, *et alia*). Specifically, how does the future separation of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan affect the present existence of wheat and tares co-existing with each other? In an eschatological view of history, grounded in God's sovereign covenant of election, it is difficult to draw the boundary between what is presently comprehended and what is not presently comprehended by covenant keepers and covenant breakers. Even so, from the state of pre-redemptive revelation to the consummate state of the eschaton, the final eschatological drama of election and covenant unfolds according to the sovereign purpose of God. In light of God unfolding His will in revelational-history, Van Til's main concern was not to provide a lengthy exposition on the "rain falling on the just and the unjust," or whether $2+2=4$. Although he addressed these issues, his main concern was to place these issues

²⁵*Common Grace*, v. Of particular interest to Van Til is Romans 1 and 5, 1 Corinthians 15, and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 4, section 2; chapter 6, sections 1 and 3.

²⁶*Common Grace*, 68.

in the context of revelational-history. In this arena, he admitted that “only those who are seriously concerned with interpreting the whole of history in terms of the counsel of God can be puzzled by the question of that which is ‘common’ between believer and unbeliever.”²⁷ For Van Til that puzzle comes together by following the basic historical pattern of pre-redemptive revelation, Adam’s fall, Christ’s redemption, and the final eschaton.²⁸

2.1. Pre-Redemptive Revelation

Van Til echoed the teaching of Geerhardus Vos in this concept of pre-redemptive revelation.²⁹ Herein we are referring to Adam’s original created status in relationship to God’s revelation. As Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15, and the Reformed Confessions teach, Adam is the federal head of humanity; all men are represented in Adam’s original state. This teaching from Scripture and the Reformed Confessions is at the heart of Van Til’s view of common grace. To begin, Van Til held that all men, including those who are decreed before the foundation of the world as elect and as reprobate, are represented in Adam when God first created him.³⁰ Although Van Til did not overlook God’s original decree, nevertheless, in the domain of history it is important to understand that God leads the elect and the reprobate to their particular destiny. For Van Til, God’s providence incorporates genuine progress, and thus, *genuine variations* in human relationships as well as relationships to God and the world will unfold. In order for these *variations* to exist within the human race, all humans are represented in Adam’s original perfection and holiness, or to put it

²⁷*Common Grace*, 12.

²⁸In terms of the pattern of revelational-history, I will focus upon pre-redemptive revelation and Adam’s fall. As I speak of the Adam’s fall into sin, I will blend into the discussion redemption in Christ as well as the final destiny of the believer and the unbeliever. For our present discussion, this integration will have to be sufficient; I will not discuss each aspect separately.

²⁹Cf. *Common Grace*, 69, and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust [reprinted], 1992), 19-44.

³⁰See *Common Grace*, 30.

another way, all men have a *general* identity in the first stage of Adam's appearance – being perfect and holy. Particularly, Van Til remarked that there is a *sameness* with a *difference*; all men are the *same* in Adam's original perfection, but there is the *difference* of decree between the elect in Christ and the reprobate.³¹ Even so, in the original state of perfection, God walked and talked with humanity's representative head – Adam; natural revelation was not separated from supernatural revelation.³² Adam was not living in two abstract revelations; rather, he was living in one *concrete* situation. Specifically, our representative Adam understood revelation *holistically*. Moreover, "man was originally placed before God as a covenant personality."³³ This covenant relationship with God cannot be separated from God's revelation to man. As Van Til remarked: "To speak of man's relation to God as being covenantal at every point is merely to say that man deals with the personal God everywhere."³⁴ In the pre-redemptive state, every manipulation or interpretation of the facts is a covenant-affirming activity; it is in correspondence to the revelational truth of God's work. Herein, there is *one* holistic unified interpretation that the facts are from God, through God, and to God.

For Van Til, herein lies the notion of common grace. In this pre-redemptive state, all men in Adam (the elect and reprobate) have a unified understanding and interpretation of the revelation of God and His creation. God's revelation is everywhere; all men have a consciousness within them that they are created in the image of God and all men have the testimony of God that he is the Creator and sustains all things. In this condition, all men have a common ethical reaction of goodness to the common mandate of God (which some refer to as the cultural mandate); according to Van Til, "they are all mandate hearers and mandate-keepers."³⁵ God has the *same* favorable attitude to all. Being in union with Adam's original status, mankind has a holistic consciousness of pre-redemptive

³¹See *Common Grace*, 31, 32.

³²See *Common Grace*, 69.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Common Grace*, 69, 70.

³⁵*Common Grace*, 72.

revelation within them and the testimony of a holistic pre-redemptive revelation to them that continues throughout all the stages of history, even to the final consummation. The continuation of this original status Van Til calls common grace. For example, he maintained that the “rain and the sunshine” which envelops all mankind has its root in God’s favorable attitude to all in this original state. Moreover, men can agree that $2+2=4$, or that a bass is sixteen inches long, because of man’s original union with the testimony of holistic revelation given to man’s first representative, Adam. Hence, the psychological, ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological conditions of all mankind are represented in Adam’s original perfection. A problem occurs, however, at the fall.

2.2. *The Fall*

Once again, following the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed Confessions concerning Adam being the federal head of the human race, Van Til held that when Adam fell into sin, *all* men became sinners. All men became objects of God’s *wrath*; all became sinners on the same day through the act of a common representative, including those decreed as elect and reprobate.³⁶ As Van Til stated: “It was *mankind*, not some individual elect or reprobate person, that sinned against God.”³⁷ Herein there is also a *sameness* with a *difference*; all men are in the *same* state as being objects of God’s wrath, but there remains a *difference* in that some are elected in Christ unto redemption and some are decreed to be reprobate. Moreover, man’s fall is one of total rebellion; the concrete and holistic interpretation of man in relationship to revelation must remain intact at this point. One cannot separate natural revelation and special revelation as objects against which man rebels (e.g., man rebels against special revelation but the truth of natural revelation remains intact), nor can one separate man’s covenant relationship with God from the fall. Hence, after the fall

³⁶See *Common Grace*, 30.

³⁷*Common Grace*, 74.

every manipulation and interpretation of the facts is a covenant-breaking activity by a rebellious and depraved humanity.³⁸

2.3. *The Relation of Common Grace and Total Depravity*

As Van Til considered the federal headship of Adam in relation to the human race, he carefully noted that Adam represented two states which have profound significance in the providence of God: the original holiness of all mankind and the original sinfulness of all mankind. In light of these two states, Van Til claimed that there will exist *genuine variations* in human relationships as well as relationships with God and the world throughout history. Hence, there is a real conflict in history between common grace and total depravity. Although common grace belongs to the original state of Adam's perfection, nevertheless, it continues in man as he exists in a depraved state.³⁹ In the negative sense, Van Til held that it is not possible to tone down the doctrine of total depravity.⁴⁰ The doctrine has such an effect upon man's evil nature that man makes every attempt to operate unconscious of the original attitude of favor that God bestowed upon mankind, and he also makes every attempt to operate unconscious of the real significance of his own sinful direction. On the other hand, in the positive sense, Van Til taught that "common grace is the necessary correlative to the doctrine of total depravity."⁴¹ Herein, one must understand that Adam's act of sin is performed against the common mandate (cultural mandate) of God's favor to mankind as a whole. Without the original common mandate, Adam's sin would have operated in a total void, i.e., his sin would have been an offense against nothing. Since man's sin did not operate in a void, all mankind came under the common wrath of God.

For Van Til, however, the correlative relationship between common grace and total depravity has another salient point in the

³⁸See *Common Grace*, 70.

³⁹See *Common Grace*, 91.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

drama of history. In history, through the sovereign work of God the elect will choose redemption in Christ, whereas the reprobate will reaffirm their choice for Satan.⁴² God's providential control over history will show that the reprobate, who are totally depraved in principle, will more and more be conformed to the principle of depravity which controls their heart.⁴³ According to Van Til, "they do this by way of rejecting the common call, the common grace of God. That is to say, they do this by way of rejecting God to whatever extent God reveals Himself to them."⁴⁴ Van Til concluded, therefore, that in the historical process in which common grace is correlative to total depravity, we have

the "relative good" in the "absolutely evil" [non-Christian] and the "relatively evil" in the "absolutely good" [Christian]. Neither the "absolutely evil" nor the "absolutely good" are epistemologically as self-conscious as they will be in the future [day of final judgment]. God's favor rests upon the reprobate and God's disfavor rests upon the elect to the extent that each lacks epistemological self-consciousness [in present history]. In neither case is it God's ultimate or final attitude, but in both cases it is a real attitude.⁴⁵

For this reason, Van Til declared that the unbeliever can be a person who contributes greatly to human culture; he can be a great artist, mathematician, physicist, doctor, mechanic, nurse, or teacher. He can be a person of integrity and honesty by establishing moral law upon a god (Cicero) or upon nature (Lucretius). On the other hand, believers can be seduced by dishonesty; they can be docile in terms of using the gifts God has given them. Furthermore, some believers may base their knowledge solely upon the foundation of the ontological triune God of the Bible, whereas other believers may base their knowledge upon the ontological triune God of the Bible

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴*Common Grace*, 91.

⁴⁵*Common Grace*, 92.

and an Aristotelian conception of logic. As you can see, there are *variations* in which God's favor of common grace continues upon all mankind, and there are *variations* in which depravity is expressed in all mankind. For this reason, Van Til maintained that the antithesis between the unbeliever and the believer was never metaphysical and psychological, but always epistemological and ethical.⁴⁶ Metaphysically and psychologically, mankind can never be anything but the image of God, nor can mankind ever escape the imprint of God upon every inch of the universe and the constitution of his own being.⁴⁷ All men, even presently, are responsible for the original pre-redemptive revelation of God to mankind.⁴⁸

Even so, in light of the fall, there exists also a real antithesis – an epistemological and ethical antithesis. From Van Til's perspective, one must realize that the antithesis is not referring to the continuation of man's metaphysical and psychological *knowledge* from his original pre-redemptive state. For example, every man knows that he is created by God. In fact, Van Til held that only upon the foundation of man's original union with Adam's pre-redemptive state could there be a discussion of an antithesis. After all, fallen man is rebelling against his pre-redemptive state. Specifically, this rebellion involves the *interpretation* of the facts of revelation which are still in place after the fall. Hence, Van Til was clear that the antithesis is an epistemological and ethical antithesis of *interpreting* the facts; it does not refer to the metaphysical and psychological constitution of man.⁴⁹ Van Til was emphatic about this point when he wrote: "The point is that when and to the extent that the natural man is engaged in interpreting life in terms of his *adopted principles then*, and *only then*, he has nothing in common with the believer."⁵⁰ Specifically, only when men are "self-consciously engaged in the interpretative enterprise" do the Christian and the non-Christian have nothing epistemologically in

⁴⁶See *Common Grace*, 86, 196.

⁴⁷See *Common Grace*, 53-54, 196.

⁴⁸See *Common Grace*, 88.

⁴⁹See *Common Grace*, 5, 151, 163.

⁵⁰*Common Grace*, 163.

common.⁵¹ Moreover, after the fall, the ethical subject, man, acts with an attitude of hostility in respect to pre-redemptive revelation.⁵² Following the teaching of the Apostle Paul, Van Til stated that man's ethical hostility operates in his interpretative activity to suppress the truth (pre-redemptive revelation) in unrighteousness (see Romans 1:18). Here, in the context of the interpretative activity, Van Til maintained that a description of the facts is an explanation of the facts. This interpretative activity is always a holistic enterprise; in this situation, the metaphysical, psychological, epistemological, and ethical aspects are viewed as one exercise. Hence, facts are never neutral. They always exist in the context of man's holistic interpretation of life.

IV. Conclusion

By keeping in mind that Van Til's whole construction is embedded in revelational-history, let me return to our examples in order to briefly summarize what Van Til is saying. If the unbeliever says that $2+2=4$, or if the unbeliever says that a bass is sixteen inches long, then he makes these true statements on the basis of his psychological and metaphysical union with pre-redemptive revelation (a holistic revelation – natural and special). After the fall, this same pre-redemptive understanding continues (common grace), but the interpretative process is accompanied by an attitude of rebellion against the living and true God. Hence, for the unbeliever, the mathematical proposition and the length of the bass operate in the context of man-interpreted facts and a chance created universe which are epistemologically and ethically antithetical to the continual meaning and purpose of God's revelation (a holistic rejection of revelation – natural and special). Herein the unbeliever and believer have nothing in common, since the believer interprets factual truth with a heart in obedience to his Creator and with a confession that his Creator is the fountain of all truth.

⁵¹See *Common Grace*, 151.

⁵²See *Common Grace*, 53.

Hence, Van Til's own reconstruction of the doctrine of common grace was quite different from the traditional Dutch Reformed position. In contrast to Kuyper, Bavinck, and Hepp, he attempted to eliminate the tendency to view common grace in the context of a systematic construction of natural revelation and special revelation. Specifically, natural revelation was viewed as the domain of common grace insights on the part of the unbeliever (through human reason and experience), whereas special revelation was the domain for the illumination of believers (through faith). By analyzing the self-conscious states of man in union with Adam, Van Til was able to understand the reception of the concrete picture of revelation to man (pre-redemptive, common grace) and the rejection of the concrete picture of revelation to man (the fall). For him, the issue has never been that human reason and experience maintain a camaraderie with natural revelation in order to preserve or gain common grace insights. Rather, the issue has been that two states of man's historical self-consciousness of God's revelation are placed in struggle (by variation) against each other until they are totally separated in the final eschaton.