
WHOLLY OTHER OR WHOLLY GIVEN OVER?
WHAT VAN TIL MISSED
IN HIS CRITICISM OF BARTH

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*I know that without me God cannot an instant be
He needs must perish, were death to come to me....
Nought is but I and thou, and if we two are not¹
Then God is no more God, and heaven itself is nought*

INTRODUCTION

“Our purpose, then, is frankly polemical. We would rally the forces of the Reformed Faith and behind them of evangelical Christianity against this new enemy. This enemy comes in the guise of a friend; he is all the more dangerous for that.” So wrote Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), longtime professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, concerning the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). Van Til’s opposition to Barth’s theology lasted over thirty years and had a significant influence on reformed and evangelical estimates of Barthianism. He has been called “the watchdog of

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A poem by the Roman Catholic bishop Angelus Silesius (1624-1677). Cf. Karl Barth’s discussion in *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 2.1:281-282. Cf. also footnote 37.

Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1946), 3.

Van Til’s two most significant publications on Barth’s theology came in 1946 (Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*) and 1962 (Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962]). However, he began writing articles on Barth for the *Presbyterian Guardian* in 1931, and his final Barth publication was published in 1964 (Cornelius Van Til, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* [Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964]). His publications on Barth thus spanned approximately 33 years.

evangelicalism against Barth,” and his anti-Barth work has been called “the primary response of the American conservative community to Barth” and “the official Evangelical interpretation of Neo-orthodoxy.” As early as 1938, J. Oliver Buswell wrote to Van Til to request a copy of Van Til’s class syllabus on Barth for himself and Gordon Clark. Buswell and Clark would both become strong critics of Barth’s theology. In 1970 another Barth critic, Francis Schaeffer, wrote to Van Til for his 75th birthday, “you pointed out for all the world to read that Barth’s theology [was] wrong at its core, and not just in the details.” To this day, considerable uncertainty and suspicion surround evangelical and reformed evaluations of Barth, and no one has been more influential in generating this response than Van Til. As Muether observes, “it is impossible to overemphasize the role that Van Til served in the early American evangelical reaction to Barth. He succeeded in characterizing neo-orthodoxy as a more subtle form of modernism, and this analysis carried far beyond the Reformed churches.”

In this essay I will examine Van Til’s criticism of Barth in three steps. First, I will *describe* Van Til’s criticism of Barth as it is articulated in his major anti-Barth writings. Secondly, I will critically *evaluate* Van Til’s criticism of Barth. My argument will be that Van Til’s critique rests upon a serious misinterpretation of Barth’s theology. Thirdly, I will attempt to *explain* Van Til’s criticism of Barth by examining some factors in Van Til’s historical context that make his reaction to Barth more intelligible. I will conclude by making some reflections on current evangelical assessment of Barth.

DESCRIPTION OF VAN TIL’S CRITICISM OF BARTH

The essence of Van Til’s criticism is that Barth’s theology, like the modernist theology out of which it emerged, posits an “activistic” conception of God and

Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 70.

Gregory G. Bolich, *Karl Barth & Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 67.

Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1983), 23.

J. Oliver Buswell to Cornelius Van Til, November 16, 1938, in the papers of J. Oliver Buswell, box 287, file 80, PCA Historical Center, St. Louis, MO.

Francis A. Schaeffer to Cornelius Van Til, April 13, 1970 quoted in John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2008), 125.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 143.

his revelation – i.e., it posits a God has been *wholly given over* in the event of his revelation in Jesus Christ, and who thus lacks triune existence outside of, and prior to, this revelation. Stated negatively (and more simply), this means that Barth's theology denies the antecedent and objective existence of God. He claims in *The New Modernism*, for example, that Barth "is out to destroy the idea of God as ever having existed by himself," and that "Barth's own critical principles do not permit him to presuppose a triune God who exists prior to and independently of man." Barth's God, according to Van Til, has been exhaustively revealed in Christ, such that he has nothing hidden and has been "virtually... placed at man's disposal." As he later puts it in his 1954 study on Barth, "we are not to think [in Barth's theology] of a God who exists prior to and apart from his revelation in Christ. God is identical with his revelation." And because Barth has no place for the antecedence of God, he also negates the personal and triune nature of God. From *The New Modernism* again: "if we substitute the word 'reality' for Barth's word 'God' we shall not be far amiss in catching his meaning."

In his 1962 *Christianity and Barthianism*, Van Til tied this same criticism more rigorously down to Barth's Christology. Some representative quotes: "there is no God beyond Christ to whom appeal for any purpose can properly be made;" "God is identical with his act of revelation in Christ;" Barth has rejected "the idea of a God in himself back of Christ;" orthodoxy was wrong to speculate about "a God in himself apart from and above Christ;" "God is therefore identical with his coming into time, his submitting himself wholly unto

In a footnote on p. 3 of *The New Modernism*, Van Til defines *activism* as "a theology in which God is said to be wholly absorbed in the activity of his manifestation."

Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*, 3.

Idem, xv.

Idem, 3.

Cornelius Van Til, "Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?," *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 1954), 145.

Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*, 231.

Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 75.

Idem, 75.

Idem, 79.

Idem, 80.

it.” And as there is no antecedent God in Barth’s theology, so there no pre-incarnate Christ, no *logos asarkos*: “this entire process of the grace of God for all men would be stopped if we had to think of a pre-incarnate Christ as really existing prior to his work of reconciliation in time.” As in his earlier writings, Van Til attributes these errors to Barth’s “activistic concept of revelation.”

In making this criticism of Barth, Van Til was seeking to place Barth in a broader tradition of anti-Christian thought. In *The New Modernism* (note the title), he argued that Barth’s theology represents essentially the same theology as the predominant 19th century German Protestant liberal theology in which Barth was trained, represented by thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl, as well as by many of Barth’s teachers, such as Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack. Although Barth is commonly interpreted as revolting against this tradition after his 1915 crisis, Van Til claims that he has only gotten further entrenched in it because he is still dominated, along with these other thinkers, by the philosophical presuppositions of Kant and Hegel. In particular, Van Til claims Barth has been trapped in a Kantian epistemology. He spends many pages in the early chapters of *The New Modernism* contrasting Kant’s thought with orthodox Christianity, discussing Kant’s influence on subsequent Western thought, and seeking to place Barth in Kant’s chain of influence. For Van Til, Barth’s theology represents “the application of the limiting notion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to Christian theology and thus the emasculation of all the doctrines of their historic content.” As a result of this Kantian foundation, Barth is unable to offer a theology that is basically different from that of Schleiermacher.”

The severity of Van Til’s criticism is breathtaking, for it is difficult to see how a God who is wholly absorbed in his revelation can turn out to be anything more than a human mental projection, since such a God has no existence except in relation to human thought and activity. Van Til seems to draw near to this conclusion in his 1964 *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism*, “Barth’s Christ . . . is basically no more than a projection of the would-be self-sufficient man.” This may in turn explain why Van Til felt compelled to conclude that Barth’s

Idem, 105.

Idem, 105.

Idem, 107.

Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*, viii.

Idem, xvii.

Idem, xviii.

Cornelius Van Til, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism*, 32.

theology was the worst heresy in all of church history. He wrote at the end of his 1954 study:

no heresy that appeared at [Nicea, Chalcedon, Dort, or the assembly of the Westminster divines] was so deeply and ultimately destructive of the gospel as is the theology of Barth.... Never in the history of the church has the triune God been so completely and inextricably intertwined with his own creature.

I conclude this section with a representative sample from *The New Modernism* for a succinct summary of Van Til's position:

Barth's 'wholly other' God has turned out to be only the idea of abstract contingency and abstract rationality. This God is but a limiting conception invariably used by the would-be autonomous man as his self-chosen ideal. Modern Protestantism, as derived from Schleiermacher, should have little enough to oppose in this. Barth has build his *Romans* on the same principle as that on which Schleiermacher build his *Christian Faith*. The differences between them, as has earlier been suggested, leave untouched their common Critical foundation. The only foe against whom Barth really militates is orthodox historical theology.

EVALUATION OF VAN TIL'S CRITICISM OF BARTH

In this section I will argue that Van Til's interpretation of Barth's theology is seriously flawed – not only missing Barth, but often making him out to be the exact opposite of who he actually was and ascribing to him the very positions he most forcefully rejected. In other words, Van Til did not arrive at the house next door: he had the wrong zip code. I will examine, first, Van Til's claim that Barth's theology denies the antecedence of God; second, his identification of Barth's theology with the modern liberal theology of Schleiermacher and Ritschl through their Kantian link; third, some specific areas of distortion in his characterization of Barth's theology.

First, as we have seen, Van Til claims that Barth's theology denies the antecedent existence of the triune God because God is *wholly given over* in his revelation in Christ. It is true that Barth places a distinctive emphasis on the centrality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and that he insists the one whom we meet in this revelation is truly God. But Barth also explicitly and repeatedly affirms that God is God before, outside of, and apart from this revelation. He writes, for example, "God is who He is in the act of His revelation. God seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us, and therefore He loves us. But He is this loving God without us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the freedom of the Lord, who has His life from Himself."

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Cornelius Van Til, *Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?*, 181.

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Idem, 106.

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Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2.1:257.

Again and again in the *Dogmatics*, Barth take pains to stress that the triune God is *not* swallowed up in his work in Jesus Christ, or in any of his works – the very charge Van Til raises against him. “[God] is the same even in Himself, even before and after and over His works, and without them. They are bound to Him, but He is not bound to them. They are nothing without Him. But He is who He is without them. He is not, therefore, He who is only in His works.” And again,

God is not swallowed up in the revelation and attitude of Himself to the world and us as actualized in His revelation. The dignity and power of His works, of His relation and attitude, depends much more on the fact that as distinct from them, without being any other than the One who manifests Himself in them, He is Himself; that, while He reveals Himself in them, He remains at the same time superior to them.

Affirmations of God’s eternity and prior existence are also very strong in Barth’s *Dogmatics*. Having read Van Til’s assertion that, in reading Barth, “we are not to think of a God who exists prior to and apart from his revelation in Christ,” one is shocked to find Barthian statements such as the following:

God is pre-temporal. This means that His existence precedes ours and that of all things. . . . God was in the beginning which precedes all other beginnings. He was in the beginning in which we and all things did not yet exist. He was in the beginning which does not look back on any other beginning presupposed by this beginning itself. God was in Himself. He was no less himself, no less perfect, not subject to any lack, super-abounding from the very first even without us and the world.

Later:

Originally and properly there is no other outside of [God]. Everything beside and outside him is only secondary. It exists only on the basis of His gracious creation and providence The real person is not man but God. It is not God who is a person by extension, but we. God exists in his act. God is His own decision. God lives from and by Himself.

Such statements are not at all rare in Barth’s writings. In fact, it would not be an over-statement to suggest that this very point – the antecedence and independence and priority of God - is one of the main emphases in Barth’s *Dogmatics*, and one of main burdens of his whole theology.

Idem, 260.

Idem, 260.

Cornelius Van Til, “Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?,” 13.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2.1:621.

Idem, 271-2.

It is therefore difficult to comprehend Van Til's assertion in *The New Modernism* that Barth "is out to destroy the idea of God as ever having existed by himself." It is also difficult to comprehend how Van Til could have made such a claim without interacting with Barth's repeated statements to the contrary. It would be one thing if Van Til were to refer to statements in Barth like those quoted above and then offer a counter interpretation of them. But all too often Van Til completely passes by such statements. How then can his view have credibility?

Barth's statements about God's triune self-love and self-knowledge as utterly self-sufficient are also very difficult for the Van Tilian view. Regarding God's self-love, Barth writes that "it is not part of God's being and action that as love it must have an object in another who is different from ~~him~~ Him. God is sufficient in Himself as object and therefore as object of His love." It is in this context that Barth references the poem quoted at the beginning of ~~this~~ this paper as an example of how *not* to conceive the relations of God and man. Elsewhere, while arguing in favor of the personality and masculinity of God against Hegelian notions of God as a neuter absolute, Barth asserts that "God would be nonetheless God if he had not created the world and man. The world's existence and our existence is in no wise essentially necessary to God, even as the object of His love. . . . God is not lonely." In Barth's discussion of the knowledge of God, he argues for an actualistic approach in which our knowledge of God is different from other kinds of knowledge and requires God's own gracious initiative. One of Barth's consistent emphases in this section is that God's self-knowledge is prior to, and distinct from, our knowledge of God. For example,

Our knowledge of God is derived and secondary. It is effected by grace in the creaturely sphere in consequence of the fact that first of all, in itself and without us, it is actual in the divine sphere – in the sphere of God as the sphere of His own truth, of the inner truth even of our knowledge of God, who is always inaccessible to us as such.³⁹

Such statements make Van Til's reading of Barth very difficult. Far from ~~making~~ making God "completely and inextricably intertwined with his own creature," Barth

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Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*, 3.

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Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2.1:280.

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Cf. footnote 1. Barth, idem, 281-282, called this poem "pious blasphemy" and wrote, "what is beyond question is that this is the impossible way of talking about the relations of God and man."

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Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.1:158.

39 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2.1:49.

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Cornelius Van Til, *Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?*, 181.

denies the trinity, the very doctrine he is renowned for emphasizing, and then neglect to entertain any serious discussion of Barth's statements to the contrary – such an approach is comparable to denying any doctrine of predestination in John Calvin's theology without once citing or referring to the relevant passages in *The Institutes*. One is inclined to agree with Berkouwer that by criticizing Barth's doctrine of the trinity without interacting with Barth's explicit rejection of modalism, his affirmation of the historic Christian creeds, or his emphasis on the trinity as the root of all dogma, Van Til has failed “an elementary requirement of scholarship.” Indeed, given Van Til's general failure to reckon with such Barthian statements as those provided above, one can understand Brown's claim that Van Til's study “often appears to take much for granted, not least what Barth actually says,” as well as Torrance's charge that in Van Til's critique, “the actual substance of the *Church Dogmatics* . . . is not really tackled or appraised for itself.”

I now move on to my second point, Barth's relationship with theological modernism. As we have seen, Van Til has argued that Barth's theology is essentially the same as that of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, because, like theirs, it is dominated by a Kantian epistemology. As Van Til put it in *The New Modernism*, “Barth's ‘wholly other’ God appears to be virtually identical with the wholly immanent God of the ‘consciousness theologians.’” This is indeed a remarkable statement, not least because it is so contrary to the criticisms usually raised against Barth. Barth is often criticized for positing a God who is too distant, other-worldly, beyond human comprehension or reach. As Torrance put it, “it is a frequent criticism that Barth and Brunner make God out to be a distant and cold deity, and overdo the Creator-creature relationship.” This may partly explain why Barth's theology, especially in its early articulation in his *Romans*, was so poorly received by the liberal theologians of Barth's day. In fact, a thorough renunciation of modernism is sometimes taken as the hermeneutical key to Barth's entire theological enterprise. Gordon Clark took

G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 387. Cf. idem, “it certainly does not suffice to say: He denies all that, and never once enter upon Barth's expressed defense.”

Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (Chicago, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1967), 155-6.

T. F. Torrance, review of *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, by Cornelius Van Til, *The Evangelical Quarterly* 19 (1947), 145.

Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*, xv.

T. F. Torrance, Review of *The New Modernism*, 147.

this view: “(Barth’s) whole position, in fact, may be described, negatively but very aptly, as a total rejection of modernism.”

It is therefore curious that Van Til does not grapple with Barth’s ill-standing among the liberal theologians with whom he is supposedly associated. In addition, it is strange that many of the areas of agreement between Barth’s theology and conservative evangelical theology, such as a vigorous affirmation of the bodily resurrection of Christ, are not at all apparent from Van Til’s writings. As Berkouwer wrote, in Van Til’s study

only particular parts of Barth’s theology come into consideration - a factor which makes for great one-sidedness - and the whole of Barth’s theology is not discussed in terms of all his writings. Hence the motivating lines of Barth’s development in contrast to the modern theology and his great appreciation of *Kohlbrugge* do not become at all clear. Nor does it become clear why so sharp an attack upon him is being conducted by most of the prominent liberal theologians.

All this is not to suggest that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” – there may be significant differences between Barth and conservatives that need be explored. It is troubling, however, that Van Til’s study focuses narrowly on particular aspects of Barthianism and does not discuss all of Barth’s positions and all the various reactions to Barth. Such an approach smacks of one-sidedness and makes one suspicious at the outset of misrepresentation.

Van Til’s claim that Barth and Schleiermacher represent essentially identical theologies is a difficult one, for Barth’s writings are replete with anti-Schleiermacherianism. He refers to Schleiermacher’s theology as “a betrayal of Christ,” and much of his theology seems deliberately set in antithesis with the Schleiermacherian emphasis on the immanence of God and the commonality of all religion. In *Romans* Barth posits as his fundamental presupposition “the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity,” between God and man. He speaks of God as “the unknown God dwelling in light unapproachable, the Holy One, Creator, and Redeemer;” the “the hidden

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Gordon Clark, *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1963), 14.

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G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 388.

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Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, sixth ed., trans. Edwyn Hoskins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 225.

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E.g., idem, 258, 266. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Gottingen, Winter Semester of 1923-24* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 184ff.

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Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 10.

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Idem, 35.

abyss;” the “wholly Other” God who is “breaking in” to this universe through the person of Jesus Christ, in whom “two worlds meet and go apart, two planes intersect, the one known and the other unknown.” Barth’s hallmark emphasis, over and against the immanence of God, is “the Wholly-Other-ness of God, the King, the Monarch, the Despot.” This, together with his emphasis in *Romans* on the gospel as totally apart from all religion, makes it difficult to appreciate Van Til’s claim that Barth and Schleiermacher are of the same stripe. Van Til seems unable (or unwilling) to acknowledge real and serious differences between the modernist theology against which Barth reacted, and Barth’s theology *as* the reaction.

Van Til is able to dismiss these differences, however, on the basis of the common ground that he believes he has detected between Barth and Schleiermacher – namely, a Kantian epistemology. Van Til writes, “Barth’s *Romans* (1919) was conceived and born of critical parentage.” He speaks constantly of Barth’s “Critical inheritance” and his “critically informed theology.” But is this fair? Van Til seems to assume that because Barth is operating within a tradition influenced by Kantianism, Barth himself must be Kantian. This is certainly possible, but in order to decide it would be necessary to interpret Barth’s writings *on their own terms*. One would expect, for example, some explanation of the fact that in the approximately forty instances in the *Dogmatics* that Barth cites Kant, he is universally criticizing him. One would also hope for greater appreciation of the complexity of these kinds of historical relationships. Suppose there is a Kantian influence in Barth’s theology: does this justify reading Barth’s entire theology through this grid, as Van Til - by his own

Idem, 46.

Idem, 49.

Idem, 48.

Idem, 29.

Idem, 386.

Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism*, xv.

Idem, 34.

Idem, 42.

Cf. Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 34.

admission - seems to do? Philosophical influence should not be taken to cancel out real differences between the influencer and one influenced, nor can epistemological systems be assigned in such a broad stroke manner, almost as a matter of genealogical descent. As Berkouwer objects, by this line of argumentation one could write off Augustine as a neo-Platonist or Aquinas as an Aristotelian. Indeed, if the lines of philosophical influence and historical relationship could be drawn so neatly, could Van Til himself escape the charge of Kantianism?

Van Til's method of critique here feels unfair not only to Barth, but also to the entire chain of post-Kantian European philosophy (with which Barth's theology is amalgamated). Van Til tends to read this entire tradition according to a narrow contrast between Kant and Christ: "epistemologically, ~~we~~ he is united to a federal head, and the choice was simply Kant or Christ." As a result, positions often appear to be projected *onto* thinkers rather than extracted *from* them, and very different ideas and people often seem clumsily lumped together. Vastly divergent shades of gray are painted over with a stark black and white. For example, in *The New Modernism*, Van Til clumps thinkers as diverse as Kierkegaard and Hegel together as common pupils of a Kantian epistemology, and therefore common foes of historic Christianity. Anyone who has even a passing familiarity with Kierkegaard's stinging criticisms of Hegel would be embarrassed to read Van Til's assertion that "we shall not get the lines of our historical reasoning reasonably straight unless we visualize Kierkegaard joining eager hands with Hegel in common attack on Christianity." These kinds of

Here I have in mind Van Til's statement in *The New Modernism*, 366: "all the doctrines of the Theology of Crisis, then, must be seen through the spectacles of the *Critique of Pure Reason*."

G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 389: "it is evident that the relationships are too complicated to permit this kind of argumentation."

Strange as this charge may seem in light of Van Til's own attack, many of Van Til's reformed contemporaries charged him with Kantian idealism and noted similarities between Van Til's thought and Barth's. They drew parallels between the emphasis that both Van Til and Barth put on God's infinity, God's personality, their strong distinction between creature and Creator, their discussion of *analogical knowledge*, and above all, their strong antithesis between unbelievers and believers with regard to *knowing*. Gordon Clark, for example, referred to Van Til's *Why I Believe in God* as a "Barthian tract" (John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 109). Similar charges were made by Robert Reymond, James Daane, Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, and Francis Schaeffer. Cf. John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 109-110, 126-7.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 129-30.

Idem, 62. Van Til also lumps Fichte, Feuerbach, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl in with these two.

statements have led many to critique Van Til's historical perspective as simplified and/or caricatured. Diepenhorst, for example, claimed, "Van Til treats all those whom he criticizes in too much the same way⁷⁴ ignoring vast differences that separate thinkers such as Barth and Bultmann." Richardson noted that "(Van Til) could not appreciate that language of theological description could borrow from any philosophical tradition to critique these very philosophies." Torrance's early review of *The New Modernism* was particularly harsh:

(Van Til's) whole position is further complicated by the employment of a dialectical principle of philosophical individuation into which the writer insists in forcing all other men's views so that he can manipulate them at will in accordance with his own presuppositions or prejudice. By means of this dialectical procedure added to his 'lines of historical thinking' Dr. Van Til actually makes Kierkegaard agree with Hegel, and Barth with Schleiermacher. But this is surely to argue like a Molotov!

Thirdly, I turn to several specific examples of distortion in Van Til's method of critique, beginning with his methodologically abusive habit of relying upon Barth's alleged philosophical presuppositions, rather than his actual written statements. As Monsma pointed out in an early review of *The New Modernism*, Van Til does not distinguish very clearly between Barth's expressed views and Van Til's deductions of what Barth's presuppositions require. As a result, Monsma argued, *The New Modernism* at times seems "to force Barth's thought into its philosophical molds." Other reviewers have made the same critique. Daane, for example, claims that Van Til simply "lays out Barth's alleged philosophical presuppositions, draws out the logical implications - even those which Barth does not draw and even rejects - and on this basis arrives at his now familiar conclusion." Von Balthasar, Barth's leading Roman Catholic interpreter, calls "ridiculous" Van Til's attempt "to explain the whole theology of Barth and Brunner on the basis of their earlier positions and in terms of the philosophical principles that are supposedly at the root of their system."

I. A. Diepenhorst, review of *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel*, by Cornelius Van Til, *Free University Quarterly* 2 (1952-53), 139 quoted in John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 144.

Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 71.

T. F. Torrance, review of *The New Modernism*, 145.

Peter H. Monsma, Review of *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, by Cornelius Van Til, *Theology Today* (October 1946) 424-5.

James Daane, review of *Christianity and Barthianism*, by Cornelius Van Til, *Reformed Journal XIII* (January 1963), 29.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 45.

Berkouwer as well: “Van Til, however, on the basis of philosophical assumptions which he thinks he finds in Barth . . . draws conclusions which Barth himself draws least of all, conclusions, in fact, *which he himself has more than once and at great length opposed.*” One would have expected from Van Til more awareness of the difficulty of determining another person’s presuppositions, as well as the danger of using these perceived presuppositions to force people into positions they do not hold. As Ramsdell concluded in another early review of *The New Modernism*, “if Dr. Van Til were as critical with respect to his own presuppositions as he seeks to be with Barth and Brunner, his book would hold have a good deal more scholarly interest.”

Another example of distortion is Van Til’s failure to acknowledge changes and developments in Barth’s thinking over the years. Monsma criticized *The New Modernism* for attaching too much importance to things that Barth had explicitly rejected, and Torrance wrote more plainly of the same book, “it is certainly a great pity that the *Church Dogmatics* is not really discussed until more than half-way through the book, and even then discussion is rigidly tied down to what Barth has deliberately repudiated as his ‘egg-shells.’” A clear example of this in chapter two of *The New Modernism*, its first lengthy chapter after the briefer introductory material. In a lengthy comparison of Barth and Kant, Van Til deals *exclusively* with Barth’s pre-1915 writings - specifically, a 1909 article written on theology just before entering ministry, and a 1914 article written as a pastor on the personality of God. Although Van Til acknowledges that Barth claims to have moved away from his view in these articles, he does not seriously entertain the possibility that this movement was genuine; nor does he consider Barth’s further development after 1915.

A third area of misrepresentation is the way Van Til attributes positions to Barth which Barth emphatically rejected. I will limit myself to one example here: the doctrine of the virgin birth. Barth’s affirmation of the virgin birth, over and against its denial by Brunner, is well known.⁸⁵ Yet Van Til claims that “Barth rejects the orthodox view of the virgin birth.” Although Barth has *seemed* to affirm the virgin birth of Christ, all he has really affirmed is “pure

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G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 385-6, italics his.

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E. T. Ramsdell, “Barth as Heretic!,” review of *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, by Cornelius Van Til, *The Christian Century* LXIII (7 August 1946), 964-5.

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Peter H. Monsma, review of *The New Modernism*, 424-5.

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Torrance, review of *The New Modernism*, 145.

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Cf. idem, 28ff.

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Cornelius Van Til, “Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?,” 165-6.

contingency” and “the possibility of human nature’s being taken up into unity with the Son of God.” Thus, in Barth’s theology, “all men partake of the virgin birth.”

How this view can be maintained in light of Barth’s repeated affirmations of the virgin birth in the *Church Dogmatics*, his defense of this doctrine over and against the objections raised by Harnack, Seeberg, Schleiermacher, Althaus, Brunner, and others, as well as his reflections on the theological significance of the virgin birth, is difficult to understand. Barth refers to the virgin birth as a testimony of Jesus’ *divine origins* – a testimony that he is different, holy, from outside the system. Barth speaks of this doctrine as “the sign which accompanies and indicates the mystery of the incarnation of the Son, marking it off as a mystery from the beginnings of other human existences.” Or again, “the Virgin Birth at the opening and the empty tomb at the close of Jesus’ life bear witness that this life is in fact marked off from all the rest of human life.” Far from being an event in which all men participate, as Van Til claims, it is this *very event*, according to Barth, which sets Christ apart from all other men. Once again, Van Til’s depiction of Barth seems to be not only off, but diametrically opposite to Barth’s actual position.

All this perhaps makes intelligible Barth’s reaction to Van Til’s critique, who said in amazement that he could not recognize himself at all in Van Til’s writings, charged that Van Til seemed “to have understood *not a single word* from all I have written,” and regarded Van Til’s criticism as “almost a willful caricature.”

EXPLANATION OF VAN TIL’S CRITICISM OF BARTH

It now remains to consider why Van Til took the view that he did. The simplest and best answer to this question is to consider Van Til’s criticism of Barth in light of the historical and denominational context in which Van Til lived and

Idem, 165.

Idem, 166.

Idem, 166.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:207, italics mine.

Idem, 2.1:182, italics mine.

G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 388.

Karl Barth to Edward Geehan, November 14, 1965 quoted in John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 191.

G. W. Bromily, “Karl Barth,” in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Philip H. Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 52.

wrote, as a key player in the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). Early WTS and OPC identity was forged in the fires of the split with Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) in 1929. As Hart and Muether observe,

the history of the church holds the key to the denomination's identity The OPC was born in the midst of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and it has continued to experience disputes and strife throughout its history. In fact, the OPC has a reputation for not backing away from controversy.

J. Gresham Machen, who led the conservative faction that split from PTS to become WTS (of which Van Til was a key member), had predicted that the events of 1929 would result in the decline and collapse of Princeton seminary. Thus, as Muether observes, “the inevitability of Princeton’s decline after 1929 was an essential part of Westminster’s rationale for existence.” Samuel G. Craig’s comment during his 1934 address at WTS’s fifth commencement his telling,

it is impossible, it seems to me, to justify the establishment of Westminster Seminary if it be true, as was alleged, in the issue of the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, from which I have quoted, that the Assembly in reorganizing Princeton Seminary ‘not only preserved the old safeguards of conservative doctrinal teaching devised when the seminary was organized, but enlarged and strengthened them.’

Evidence for Princeton’s decline, however, was not easy to find during WTS’s early years. Princeton was growing in size and had not continued to move in the liberal trajectory that Machen and others had thought it would.

Among WTS faculty, no one was more eager to vindicate Machen’s prediction than Van Til. Referred to as WTS’ “watchdog on Princeton Seminary,” Van Til argued throughout the 1930’s that the school’s interest in neo-orthodoxy was evidence of corruption. He wrote articles for *Christianity Today* and the *Presbyterian Guardian* which attacked the seminary and its new faculty acquisitions. By 1937, Van Til charged, “Karl Barth had conquered

D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee on Christian Education and Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 7.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 73.

Samuel G. Craig, *Westminster Seminary and the Reformed Faith* (An Address Delivered in Witherspoon Hall, Philadelphia, May 8, 1934, on the Occasion of the Fifth Commencement of Westminster Theology Seminary), 7.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 121-2.

Idem, 73.

Princeton.” By making no distinction between Barthianism and liberalism, Van Til was able to view Princeton’s development in the 1930’s as completely consistent with Machen’s prediction. As Muether puts it, “by establishing this overt link between Barth and Princeton, Van Til sought to defend against skeptics Machen’s claim about Princeton’s inevitable demise after 1929.”

It is fascinating to consider the similarity of Van Til’s polemics against Princeton and his polemics against Barth. Consider, for example, his words in an article for the *Presbyterian Guardian* in 1949 entitled *New Modernism at Old Princeton*: “the Christ of the present day Princeton Seminary is not the Christ of Charles Hodge, Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, and of Geerhardus Vos The Christ of modernized Princeton is not God.” One thinks of Van Til’s statement in 1964 that “the Christ of Modernism is not the Christ of historic Christianity Barth’s Christ . . . is basically no more than a projection of the would-be self-sufficient man;” or his assertion in 1962 that “Barth replaces the Christ of Luther and of Calvin with a Christ patterned after modern activist thought.” When the Confession of 1967 in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was passed, Van Til claimed that Barth was the secret father of this confession, and viewed this event as the vindication of all his anti-Barth work.

Without denying the complexity of this question or the presence of additional factors, I would suggest that this historical backdrop is the crucial element involved in Van Til’s attack on Barth. Given the way Van Til’s own personal and ecclesiastical identity was bound up over and against developments at PTS after the 1929 split, it is difficult to deny that the popularity of Barth’s theology at PTS during these years would have made it difficult for Van Til to give Barth a fair hearing.

It may provide additional understanding to consider Van Til’s criticism in relation to his other writings and controversies. A rigorously militant approach to theological dialogue was not unique to Van Til’s Barth work – it characterized all of his writings. During the course of his theological career, he directed his polemics not only against liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, but also broader evangelicalism, which he saw as having “nothing basically in common with

Idem, 120.

Idem, 121.

Cornelius Van Til, “New Modernism at Old Princeton,” *Presbyterian Guardian* (September 1949), 166-7 quoted in John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 122.

Cornelius Van Til, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism*, 32.

Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, vii.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 194.

historic Christianity” (again reminiscent of his attack on Barth), as well as Billy Graham, and C.S. Lewis, German fundamentalist theology, and numerous reformed thinkers, including Francis Schaeffer, J. Oliver Buswell, Gordon Clark, Carl Henry, J. Edward Carnell, Edwin Rian, and Herman Dooyeweerd (many of whom were once personal friends and former students). By the end of his life, Van Til even began to harbor suspicions that WTS, where he had taught for over fifty years, was “losing its militant edge, and he felt increasingly estranged from the seminary he had helped to found. For all his life, and in all his writings, Van Til seemed to be in attack mode. In his Barth writings, for example, he experienced something not unlike battle fatigue:

Van Til confessed to his nephew, Henry Van Til, that his attention to Barth bordered on an obsession. He blamed Barth for wearing out his typewriter ribbons, and he conceded that his long hours of work only contributed to his health problems. His doctor told him in 1949 that he was suffering from battle fatigue not unlike a soldier, which brought to mind the struggles Nicholas Van Til, another nephew, was experiencing. ‘Nick used to see Japanese in his dreams. I see Buswell and Barth: which is worse?’

Even Van Til’s more sympathetic interpreters, such as Muether and Frame, admit that Van Til was “at his worst in his critiques of other thinkers;” he “tended to put the worst possible construction on the statements of non-Reformed writers;” “his stance toward [theological liberalism and neo-orthodoxy] was one of confrontation, not at all one of dialogue;” “he seemed

Idem, 182.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 194, 184.

Idem, 138.

See Cornelius Van Til, “For What Are We Contending?,” *Christianity Today* (December 1932), 11.

John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 224.

Cornelius Van Til to Henry Van Til, November 14, 1942 quoted in John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 128.

John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 399.

Idem, 16.

Idem, 35.

eager to pick a fight;”¹¹¹ “in his extreme antithetical mode, he tended to miss the obvious.”

CONCLUSION

I will finish this study by noting two conclusions which do not follow from it, and one which does. First, it does not follow from what I have written here that Van Til's general contribution to theology should be in any way denigrated. There can be no question of his importance, especially in the realm of apologetics. If it is true, as John Frame has suggested, that Van Til tended to adopt an *all or nothing* approach toward other thinkers, that is no reason why the same approach should be adopted towards him. Secondly, it does not follow that there is no room for further criticism of Karl Barth's theology. Barth's theology may be flawed for reasons different than those given by Van Til, or there may be problems with specific areas of his thought or method.

What I would suggest from this essay is that interpreters of Barth, especially those in the Van Tilian chain of influence, make greater effort to form their interpretations of Barth through *thoughtful and discerning interaction with Barth's writings*. In evangelical circles, and especially in reformed circles in America and Britain, Barth is often regarded with suspicion, dismissed without a reading, summarized with neat but unhelpful slogans, and/or written off as a liberal. All would profit from more careful reading of Barth's writings, more caution, fairness, and balance in analysis, and a fresh openness to the complexities and nuances of his work.

This conclusion follows most of all for those who share concerns about Barth, because genuine and vigorous opposition to Barth's theology is not well served by Van Til's critique. It may be that part or all of Barth's theology needs to be rejected, but it should be fairly engaged before it is rejected. Even if one finds, upon one's own separate reading and reflection, Karl Barth to be the worst heretic in the history of the church – let him nevertheless be denounced for what he is and not something he is not.

¹¹¹ John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 234.

¹¹² John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 112.