

## CAN ONE BE BOTH A DISPENSATIONAL AND “COVENANTAL” APOLOGIST?

by  
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### INTRODUCTION

K. Scott Oliphint’s recent volume on apologetics is, on its own merits, a noteworthy and useful work.<sup>2</sup> Its importance does not rest in its novelty, and that by design. Oliphint acknowledges in his introduction that “this book will...translate the language, concepts, and ideas set forth in [Cornelius] Van Til’s Reformed apologetic into language, terms, and concepts that are more accessible.”<sup>3</sup> While not an analysis of Van Til’s thought *per se*, the book everywhere assumes the validity of Van Til’s apologetic and seeks to show how it might be employed in a contemporary defense of the faith.

For such reasons, *Covenantal Apologetics* should take its place among the most useful of the numerous introductions to Van Til’s apologetic.<sup>4</sup> Van Til is notoriously challenging to understand and this for a variety of reasons: his employment of the now-unfamiliar language of absolute idealism, the often unpredictable organization of his writings, and, not least, his own profundity. For these reasons, most people are helped if they enter the study of Van Til with a tour guide, and Oliphint’s work ably fills that role.

To label Oliphint’s work an introduction to Van Til should not be taken as implying that it contributes nothing original to the discussion of apologetics. If in nothing else, *Covenantal Apologetics* differs from other Van Tilian books by shifting emphasis from meta-apologetics (namely, a defense of Van Til’s methodology) to actual apologetics (employing Van Til’s method in the defense of the Christian faith). This is a welcome and needed move, as far too often Van Tilian apologists seem to find it necessary to spend more time debunking traditional theistic proofs than demonstrating the positive use of their own approach. In addition to this virtue, Oliphint submits a handful of other

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<sup>2</sup>*Covenantal Apologetics: Principle and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). In the interest of full disclosure, Oliphint was my doctoral advisor at Westminster Theological Seminary.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>4</sup>And this despite Oliphint’s insistence that his volume is a *translation* of Van Til, rather than an introduction (26). The distinction is admittedly based more on marketing than content.

significant original ideas in *Covenantal Apologetics*. Chief among these is a distinction between proof and persuasion in apologetics (and the priority of the latter) and his ten tenets of apologetics.<sup>5</sup> These merit their own evaluation.

But the most obvious original proposal of Oliphint's work is found in the title itself—his advocacy of the term *covenantal apologetics* as a proper and even preferred title for Van Til's apologetic method. Anyone with even passing familiarity with Van Til knows that the school of apologetics derived from his teaching has long been called *presuppositionalism*. For a variety of reasons (to be discussed below), Oliphint contends that this moniker is in need of replacement: "Though the approach I advocate is a version of what some have called presuppositionalism, that label as an approach to apologetics needs once and for all to be laid to rest. It has served its purpose well, but it is no longer descriptively useful, and it offers, now, more confusion than clarity when the subject of apologetics arises."<sup>6</sup>

If it were the case that Oliphint's proposal amounted to nothing more than a mere suggestion about nomenclature, it would merit a basic level of consideration, but little else. But his claim is broader than this. He insists that the label *covenantal* is particularly apt as a summary word for Van Til's apologetic. Oliphint's argument is that he is not merely offering a convenient way to dodge whatever liabilities inhere in the term *presuppositionalism*, but that the new label gets at something essential to Van Til, and perhaps something that has not previously received the attention it truly merits. It is this idea, that a commitment to the *covenant* idea is indispensable and foundational to Van Til's apologetic, that motivates this essay.

This collection of essays is intended to honor the ministry careers of Drs. Bill Combs, Bob McCabe, and Bruce Compton. All three have, in their writing and teaching, advocated a traditional dispensational hermeneutic and the theology which flows from that hermeneutic. They also have exemplified these sound hermeneutical principles while also testing the compatibility of those principles with my chosen field of study, Van Tilian apologetics. Dispensationalism has been and seems likely to remain academically unfashionable, even in the limited context of conservative evangelical scholarship. Many dispensationalists believe that the evangelical scholarly community displays a measure of disdain for dispensationalism. Is Oliphint's title an attempt to wrest the use of Van Til from those who do not endorse a covenantal hermeneutic?

My purpose in this essay is not to review Oliphint's book,<sup>7</sup> but to evaluate the implications of his proposed nomenclature for dispensationalists. The question: can a person (coherently) be a dispensational,

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<sup>5</sup>Available at <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/treading-through-the-tenets-triunity.php>.

<sup>6</sup>*Covenantal Apologetics*, 38.

<sup>7</sup>My review of *Covenantal Apologetics* may be found in the *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 20 (2015): 102–4.

covenantal apologist? To answer this question, I will first argue that because systematic consistency and explicit theological commitments form the foundation of Van Til's apologetic, there are in fact theological positions which cannot be held consistently by anyone who hopes to employ Van Til's apologetic. In particular, and as a case study, I will demonstrate that one cannot consistently be an Arminian Van Tilian apologist. Given that at least one non-Reformed, yet orthodox position is incompatible with Van Til's apologetic, the possibility is in play that dispensationalism (as another non-Reformed, orthodox theology) might also be incompatible with Van Til. Second, I will briefly consider Oliphint's concerns regarding the traditional label of *presuppositionalism* as a way to asking whether his desire for a new title is well-founded. Third, I will then seek to articulate the significance of the covenantal idea in Van Til's apologetic to determine whether Oliphint's suggested nomenclature is indeed apt. Finally, after considering some possible counter-arguments, I will contend that there is nothing about the covenantal idea (as employed in Van Til's apologetic) that is incompatible with the basic framework of classical dispensationalism.

### VAN TIL AND ARMINIANISM

The most coherent and profitable way of reading Van Til is as an apologist who begins by taking his theology seriously. That is to say, Van Til asks, "What would a Christian apologetic need to be, assuming that Christianity is in fact true?" This seemingly benign (and even obvious) question actually has enormous implications, many of which were not adequately accounted for by classical approaches to defending the faith, sometimes even undermining Christian theism, Van Til claimed, in their implied premises. These methods of defending the faith make sense only on the assumption that the unbeliever is able, *on his own terms*, to evaluate the claims for or against Christ. Given the truth of Christianity, however, that is simply not the case.

However, to say that Van Til attempts a consistently Christian apologetic is, in itself, to say too little. Far from pursuing some defense of mere Christianity, Van Til's apologetic is intentionally and explicitly Reformed in its commitments. Indeed, Van Til endorses the idea that the Reformed faith is merely Christianity in its fullest and most consistent expression:

We have seen in the preceding chapters that Protestant epistemology is more truly Christian than Roman Catholic epistemology because it has taken seriously the noetic influence of sin. We have also seen that Lutheran and Arminian epistemology have not been as faithful to the Protestant principle as they might have been. We must now see that the Protestant principle has come to its fullest expression in Calvinism and that Calvinism is therefore more truly Christian than either Lutheranism or Arminianism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, In Defense of the Faith, 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 94.

While the label *Reformed* is itself capable of multiple significations, for our purposes its distinctive features include a commitment both to a robustly Calvinistic articulation of divine sovereignty (including God's sovereignty in matters of salvation) and to a covenantal reading of Scripture (with the attendant inclination to see Israel and the Church as two expressions of the one people of God, emphasizing their continuity rather than discontinuity).

This essay aims to ask whether Van Til's commitment to covenant theology becomes a necessary prerequisite for employing his apologetic. To appreciate the aptness of the question, we can consider first the parallel question: can a person reject a Calvinistic understanding of divine sovereignty while being Van Tilian in apologetics? The answer here is straightforward: Van Til's apologetic is flatly incompatible with any system of theology that rejects the exhaustive sovereignty taught in the Westminster standards. One cannot coherently adopt Van Til's apologetic without also adhering to a robust Calvinism. The reason for making this claim is the central role that divine sovereignty plays in Van Til's case for Christianity.

Simply put, Van Til identifies the one and the many problem (in its various manifestations) as the central problem of philosophy, and he argues that Christian theism (and it alone) has an answer to this conundrum. The one and the many problem, broadly, is the difficulty of intelligibly relating universals and particulars in such a way as to not lose the particularity in a monolithic unity, or to splinter intelligible unity into utterly unrelated and unrelatable (and therefore uncognizable) particularities.

To establish this point (both the centrality and intractability of the one and the many problem), Van Til is fond of offering a survey of Western philosophy. His story normally begins with the pre-Socratics and their various conceptions of the universe as either in constant flux (Heraclitus represents this position) or unalterable stasis (Parmenides is the spokesman for this view). Everything that follows in the history of philosophy (again, at least in Van Til's telling of it) is an attempt to bring these views into coherent connection. He moves to a discussion of Plato, with his hope for unity and knowledge in the realm of ideas, but points out that because the realm of ideas has in itself no home for plurality, the existence of mud, hair, and filth in the material world becomes a necessary correlative to the pristine world of ideas. Plurality thus requires the spatiotemporal world. Van Til argues that Plato recognized this problem, and that in his attempt to solve it Plato endorses three sequential positions: "We may say that Plato first tried to interpret reality in terms of the sense world. Then he tried to interpret reality in terms of the Ideal world. Finally he tried to interpret reality in terms of a mixture of temporal and eternal categories. In this way Plato exhausted the antitheistic possibilities."<sup>9</sup> There is the no need (in Van Til's estimation) to continue with a detailed survey of the entirety of the rest of

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., vi.

Western philosophy, for the "germs of all future antitheistic thought are found in Plato and Aristotle."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to all of these thinkers, Van Til insists that the only useful way forward philosophically is to begin with revelational theology and specifically with Christian Trinitarianism; by *begin with* we are to understand *presuppose*, in the appropriately transcendental sense. In broad strokes, Van Til finds significance in the fact that in Christian theology, God as absolute Person is both one and many, and that neither has precedence over the other, and that neither unity nor plurality in God are dependent on the existence of the created world. It is this last expression that is key.

In every other system of thought, whatever is understood as the *absolute* ends up being correlative to the flux of the world of experience and particularly to the free choices of man. In such systems, Van Til argues, all the epistemological advantages that are to be gained by positing an absolute are lost.

In Christian theology, this problem is most evident in Open Theism. The more seriously one insists on radical freedom for the creature, the more one has to constrain God (theoretically, the Absolute of the system). In particular, God's knowledge of future events must be limited. The assumption for such theologians is that God's knowledge is based on the free choices of individuals, and if those choices are free (in a libertarian sense), there is simply nothing for God to know of the future choices of men. In such a system, God himself is left to wonder about the particulars that might come to pass. Deny that God has ordained all that comes to pass freely, deny that God knows the end from the beginning, and the result is that some kind of chance or probability exists as a category bigger than God himself. God's sovereignty is cast adrift on ultimate indeterminacy, and the final epistemological advantage that Van Til highlights for Christian theism (that it, and it alone, does not reduce to chaos and skepticism) is lost.

By contrast, in a Reformed (and biblical) understanding of God's sovereignty, God is never dependent on the created world, even for his knowledge. God is *a se* (i.e., "of himself," or independent). Unity and plurality are united in his being, without the need to take into account the created world. For this to be so, then, the created world must, in every sense, be the outworking of the eternal plan of God. God does not know on the basis of choices wholly external to himself; God knows human choices because he knows his own eternal plan:

We ask now as to the nature of God's knowledge of things beyond himself. Here we must turn to the creation doctrine. God had from all eternity a plan to create the universe. We may roughly and analogically compare

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 14. This is certainly not to say that Van Til avoids critiquing the major figures of the rest of Western philosophy; he most definitely does critique them. But his critique of each tends to fall back to these same basic Platonic categories, the same problem of the one and the many that they are unable to solve, given their commitment to their own epistemic autonomy.

this to the blueprint a contractor has of a house he is going to build. When the contractor has his blueprint he does not yet have his house. The idea of a thing and the reality of the thing are not identical for him. Similarly God had from all eternity the idea of a universe.... His knowledge of that which now takes place in the universe is logically dependent upon what he has from all eternity decided with respect to the universe.<sup>11</sup>

For Van Til, because God's knowledge of created things (including the responsible choices of men) is based on his own eternal plan, there can be no unknowns for God. God's knowledge is absolutely certain. And for this reason, if a man submits himself to the Lord epistemologically, even though there are unknowns for that man, he can be absolutely certain that the things God has revealed are true and there is no possibility that a new fact might arise that could overturn that knowledge. Because the God of the Open Theist has no such knowledge, the knowledge of such a God is subject to revision. If God himself cannot ultimately know the truth (because he exists in an ultimate universe of flux and chance and indeterminacy), then his creatures gain nothing by resting their knowledge in him. Van Til's apologetic is worthless, given such a conception of God.

It is for this reason, then, that Van Til sometimes uses the term *Arminian* as a shorthand term for the traditional approaches to apologetics. Although we must allow a distinction between Open Theism and Arminianism, to whatever degree a person denies God's absolute and exhaustive sovereignty over all creation, a sovereignty rooted in God's eternal plan for his creation (rather than simple foreknowledge), that person simply cannot appeal to Van Til's apologetic. The very core of Van Til's apology is his theological commitment to absolute sovereignty: remove that commitment, and Van Til's argument for God from knowledge completely deflates.

Again, the point of this exercise is to demonstrate that there are theological commitments, even within the bounds of orthodoxy (as Arminianism is, but not Open theism is not), which disallow the use of Van Til's apologetic. For this reason, the question before us (whether dispensationalism is such a system) is relevant.

### **LIABILITIES OF THE LABEL *PRESUPPOSITIONALISM***

Before considering the merits of the new proposed label, it is worth giving some attention to the demerits that Oliphint finds in the current common label for Van Til's apologetic. Though Van Til himself rarely employed the term, his school of apologetics has been referred to as *presuppositionalism* for multiple decades. Oliphint states his reasons for abandoning this label, and the strength of these reasons is a relevant factor in evaluating the need for a new name. That is to say, if Oliphint's objections to the term *presuppositional* seem underwhelming,

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<sup>11</sup>*Defense of the Faith*, 37–38.

perhaps his suggestion of a new name could be construed merely as a move to bar dispensationalists from appropriating Van Til. Happily, however, this does not seem to be the case.

Oliphint offers two primary reasons for abandoning the label *presuppositionalism*: (1) “There are a variety of ways to understand the notion of presupposition, as well as a variety of presuppositionalists whose approaches differ significantly,” and (2) “There is also the post-Kuhnian predicament...such that paradigms and presuppositions have come to be equated..., in a way that would serve to destroy Christianity in general and Christian apologetics in particular.”<sup>12</sup>

Both reasons are sound, though the second is ultimately more convincing. While there are in fact other apologists who highlight the importance of presuppositions and do so in a different manner than Van Til would, it seems plausible that Van Til’s focus on presuppositions is more prominent than the others. In and of itself, the problem of possible confusion with other apologists does not seem very pressing (particularly in the actual practice of apologetics).

But Oliphint’s second concern is not at all trivial. It is very much the case that, at least on first impression, the term *presuppositionalism* seems very amenable to be taken relativistically: you have your presuppositions and I have mine, and thus our conversation is now at an impasse. Indeed, at least in popular usage, a *presupposition* refers to a belief that is assumed before one gathers any evidence, somewhat akin to (but slightly less contemptable than) a *bias* or a *prejudice*. Unlike Oliphint’s first objection to the term *presuppositionalism*, this is no mere matter of inconvenience or academic confusion; to miss the point here, seeing Van Til as endorsing relativism, is to completely invert the intention of apologetics itself.

Now if an apologist introduces himself, in the actual task of defending the faith, as a *presuppositional* apologist, the ensuing confusion is his own fault. Such a blunder is not the fault of the label but of the clumsy presentation. But since labels, rightly employed, should effectively and accurately identify that which is being labeled, *presuppositionalism* is almost ironic. Van Til could not be more opposed to the notion of presenting Christianity just as one of many likely options. By contrast, Van Til’s contention is that

the argument for Christianity must therefore be that of presupposition. With Augustine it must be maintained that God’s revelation is the sun from which all other light derives. The best, the only, the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity is that unless its truth be presupposed there is no proof of anything. Christianity is proved as being the very foundation of the idea of proof itself.<sup>13</sup>

If it is the case at all that the label *presuppositionalism* suggests an endorsement of relativism, it is a poor choice indeed for Van Til’s system

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<sup>12</sup>*Covenantal Apologetics*, 38–39.

<sup>13</sup>Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 298.

of thought. For this reason alone, then, Oliphint has a very strong case for seeking some other label. Whether *covenantal* has anything more to commend it is the question to which we turn next.

### THE LABEL COVENANTAL

Oliphint first considers the possibility of using some variation on the label *Reformed* for Van Til's apologetic; "however, there is a breadth and depth to the adjective *Reformed* that may make it too ambiguous as a modifier for apologetics."<sup>14</sup> Although Oliphint does not mention it, it seems likely that one motivation for avoiding the label *Reformed* for Van Til is that that label, in apologetics, has already come to be identified with the thought of Alvin Plantinga.<sup>15</sup>

But if not *presuppositional* or *Reformed*, should the label for Van Til's apologetic be *covenantal*? A useful way to test the centrality of an idea to Van Til's apologetic is to ask whether it drives Van Til to the employment of a transcendental argument for the truth of Christian theism. Though Van Til himself rarely employs the term *transcendental argument*, it is certainly a defining feature of his school of apologetics. Van Til himself often advocates arguing *by presupposition* or *by the impossibility of the contrary*. He contrasts this method of argument from the traditional approach to apologetics; the traditional arguments are *direct*, whereas the argument he advocates is *indirect*. I take each of these locutions of Van Til, more or less, to refer to his employment of a *transcendental argument*, and that this method of argumentation (with certain other qualifications) is the distinctive feature of his apologetic.

If Oliphint is correct in identifying *covenant* as a key component of Van Til's apologetic, we should expect to see that the covenant idea undergirds Van Til's employment of transcendental arguments. And indeed, this is exactly what we find.

In particular, Van Til stresses the covenantal nature of all revelation. An idea that is made explicit in the Westminster Confession of Faith,<sup>16</sup> the necessity that God condescends to his creation by means of covenant is, for Van Til, one way of expressing the exhaustively *personal* nature of not only God and his image bearers, but also of the created environment in which those image bearers live, move, and have their being. All of reality is personal; all of God's image bearers live *coram Deo*; and all creation is revelatory, because it is itself the spoken word of God made visible ("Let there be light," and so the light itself is a revelation of God).

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<sup>14</sup>*Covenantal Apologetics*, 39.

<sup>15</sup>See the sections by Kelly James Clark on Reformed Epistemology in *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2000.

<sup>16</sup>"The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.1)

By combining the aseity and sovereignty of God with the covenantal nature of revelation, Van Til finds tremendous theological implications. Before the beginning, God alone was. And God created all things, and everything was what it was because God declared it to be that way. Thus, it is not true that God declared things to be a certain way because, somehow, they already were that way. To assert something like that is precisely to deny the aseity of God; such an assertion makes God's knowledge dependent on something outside God. It follows, then, that the created world (even those things we general take as being impersonal, brute facts) is revelation of God: the tree is not *just there*; rather, the tree is there because God told it to be there. And this applies not just to the location of the tree, but to every fact about the tree, including its relationships to all of the other facts in God's universe. When God declares, "Let there be light," light, as God already conceived of it, comes into existence. All of its properties are pre-determined by God; God learned nothing about light upon its creation.

The reality that creation is, at every point, determined by God means that all of creation comes to man pre-interpreted. The meaning of any part of creation exists, prior to and apart from man's discovery of it. Truth is not something that man constructs out of the raw material of his empirical experiences; truth exists even if man does not. It is on this basis that Van Til denies the existence of brute facts. Therefore, all interpretive acts are done either in submission to the revelation of God and thus in a covenant keeping way, or with the assumption of autonomy, which is the essence of covenant breaking. The covenant breaker assumes that reality is capable of being understood with or without reference to God. He denies that reality is revelational, and therefore cuts himself off from true knowledge.

Basic to the whole activity of philosophy and science is the idea of the covenant. The idea of the covenant is commonly spoken of in relation to Theology alone. It there expresses the idea that in all things man is face to face with God. God is there said to be man's and the world's creator. God is there said to be the one who controls and directs the destiny of all things. But this is tantamount to applying the covenant idea to the philosophic and scientific fields as well as to that of theology. It is difficult to see how the covenant idea can be maintained in theology unless it be also maintained in philosophy and science. To see the face of God everywhere and to do all things, whether we eat or drink or do anything else, to the glory of God, that is the heart of the covenant idea. And that idea is, in the nature of the case, all inclusive.

There are two and only two classes of men. There are those who worship and serve the creature and there are those who worship and serve the Creator. There are covenant breakers and there are covenant keepers. In all of men's activities, in their philosophical and scientific enterprises as well as in their worship, men are either covenant keepers or covenant breakers. There are, to be sure, many gradations of self-consciousness with which men fall into either of these two classes. Not all those who are at heart covenant keepers are such self-consciously. So also not all those who are at heart covenant breakers are such self-consciously. It is a part of the task of

Christian apologetics to make men self-consciously either covenant keepers or covenant breakers.<sup>17</sup>

Again, we take note of the fact that Van Til's epistemology and metaphysics are secondary in nature to his theology; his philosophical positions are derived from the commitments of the Reformed faith. The theological commitment is given (that the covenant idea is essential to expressing God's relationship to creation); the philosophical and scientific implications of that are teased out only because the theological idea simply cannot be sacrificed.

Further, and as already noted, it becomes quickly evident that Van Til has no interest in bare theism; this is already obvious in his insistence on Trinitarianism. But even this Trinitarianism never takes on the character of abstract speculation. The Triune God has spoken in the Bible, and has revealed himself most significantly in Jesus Christ. Unless, however, the Spirit gives eyes to see this truth, covenant breakers will remain hardened against it. Van Til follows Warfield in affirming that Reformed theology is simply evangelicalism come fully into its own,<sup>18</sup> and his insistence that all men, even the philosophers, need to embrace Christ through the gospel in repentant faith is just as much part of his epistemology as it is his theology. It is hard, then, to overstate the offensive and scandalous nature of Van Til's epistemology. His commitment to Christianity, going all the way through his system, requires a transcendental argument, for the move from covenant breaker to covenant keeper is not one merely of additional information or clearer insight, but one of repentance:

The answer is that then, as now, I was convinced that only if one begins with the self-identifying Christ of Reformation theology, can one bring the "facts" of the space-time world into intelligible relation to the "laws" of this world. Science, philosophy and theology find their intelligible contact only on the presupposition of the self-revelation of God in Christ—through Scripture understood properly by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

And it is this covenantal nature of revelation that provokes Van Til into endorsing one of his more shocking beliefs: that there is a sense in

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<sup>17</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 62–63.

<sup>18</sup>“The present writer holds with the late B. B. Warfield that the Reformed Faith is the most consistent expression of Christianity. Christian apologetics is therefore considered identical with Reformed apologetics. No depreciation of non-Reformed views of Protestantism is implied. On the contrary, it is the writer's conviction that the cause of evangelical, that is, non-Reformed Protestantism, is bound to profit from a defense of the Reformed Faith, for a defense of the Reformed Faith is not primarily a defense of the “five points of Calvinism.” A defense of the Reformed Faith is a Reformed method of the defense of Christianity and this should be to the profit even of Roman Catholic Christianity” (Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969], 5).

<sup>19</sup>Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, iii.

which the covenant breaker knows nothing, and that his rejection of the revelation of God *as revelation* cuts him off from all knowledge whatever:

All the facts of the phenomenal world are incomprehensible to me precisely because they are what they are by virtue of the voluntary action of the will of God with respect to them. They are what they are, they occupy a place in the scheme of things spatio-temporal, because God by his plan and by the execution of his plan in the works of creation and providence, makes them what they are. They are in the last analysis as incomprehensible to me as is God himself. My idea of the incomprehensibility of God, therefore presupposes his true knowability. And his true knowability is based on the fact that I am his creature and that all things created are made by him. I could therefore not even assert the incomprehensibility of God unless I presupposed the knowability of God. I cannot assert the knowability of anything in the phenomenal world unless I presuppose the knowability of God. It is therefore upon the idea that all phenomenal reality, whether within the mind of man or surrounding it, is what it is because of the result of the activity of the will of God as revelational of his character. Upon this I base the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, the covenantal nature of revelation presses Van Til to a transcendental argument for Christian theism in a variety of ways. First, transcendental arguments are polarizing; in Van Til’s language, they emphasize the *antithesis* between positions (in this case, between belief and unbelief). As quoted above, Van Til understands the goal of apologetics to bring into stark relief the difference between covenant keepers and covenant breakers; because the transcendental argument does *not* pursue common ground, but instead claims that *all* ground (that is, all intelligible experience) is possible only on the presupposition of Christian theism, he highlights the difference between belief and unbelief in the most epistemically dramatic way possible.

Second, the covenantal nature of revelation leads to a transcendental defense of the faith because it makes clear that Christian theology really does not allow for common ground, as popularly understood. Because all creation is revelation, all facts are *personal* facts that point us to their Creator. This is quite the opposite of the postmodern claim that all facts are interpreted (and therefore relative); it is the claim that all facts are created and therefore pre-interpreted by the One in position to know (and he knows because the facts are his plan revealed). The kind of extravagant epistemic claims implied by such a theology could only be demonstrated by a transcendental argument, one that disallows the very possibility of the intelligibility of anything whatsoever without the presupposition of the truth of Christianity:

Assuming this autonomy apostate man gives a rebellious covenant-breaking response to the revelational challenge that he meets at every turn.

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<sup>20</sup>Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, In Defense of the Faith, 5 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978): 181–82.

The face of the triune God of Scripture confronts him everywhere and all the time. He spends the entire energy of his whole personality in order to escape seeing this face of God. When Parmenides insisted on the identity of thought and being he was basically, unknown to himself in his surface consciousness, engaged in trying to escape the face of his Creator. When Heraclitus said that all is flux he was basically in agreement with Parmenides in their common ethical hostility to their Creator.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the emphasis of the covenant idea on the irreducibly revelatory character of every facet of creation points up the need for Van Til's transcendental argument. If every fact is revelatory and in that way personal, no fact can be understood rightly by those who are rejecting the very need for a Revealer. Thus, while Van Til is not opposed to apologetic appeals to facts, he says, "But I would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer's philosophy of fact."<sup>22</sup>

What should be evident at this point is that the covenant idea is vitally important for Van Til's apologetic. In no sense at all can Oliphant be accused of having chosen a label arbitrarily.

### VAN TIL AND SCOFIELD

Having shown that there are in fact theological commitments (even within the accepted boundaries of Christian orthodoxy) that are flatly incompatible with Van Til's apologetic, and having seen that *covenant* plays a central role in the apologetics of Van Til, we are in position to ask whether dispensational theology is also at odds with Van Til. To sharpen the focus of the question, what is being debated here is not Van Til's own allegiance to a robustly covenantal theology (in the manner relevant to a discussion of hermeneutics and biblical theology). There is no reason at all to dispute this. Indeed, in at least two articles, Van Til updates a Dutch audience on what he clearly sees as the problematic rise of dispensational theology in Presbyterian circles.<sup>23</sup> Having come through the Fundamentalist/modernist controversies, Van Til now notes that there must be a battle *within* the Fundamentalist camp over the issue of dispensationalism.

So the question is not over Van Til's own hermeneutic (which was undoubtedly covenantal). The question is whether the covenant idea as it undergirds Van Til's apologetic is in any way at odds with a dispensational framework. It is a commonplace observation that covenant theologians recognize the reality of differing dispensations of God's working

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<sup>21</sup>Van Til, Response to Herman Dooyeweerd, "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1971), 97.

<sup>22</sup>Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 293.

<sup>23</sup>"De Algemeene Synode," *De Reformatie* 17 (Dec 1936): 94-95; "Fundamentalisme," *De Reformatie* 17 (May 1937): 272.

with his people, and that dispensationalists recognize the central importance of God's covenants throughout redemptive history. The mere presence of the word *covenant*, then, or even an emphasis on its importance, in no way is itself an obstacle for the dispensationalist.

It is my claim that the covenantal idea that is so vital to Van Til is a theological concept that is in no way incompatible with a dispensational theology (so long as that dispensationalism is paired with a commitment to God's exhaustive sovereignty). The possible conflicts between Van Til's apologetic and a dispensational hermeneutic typically rest on a mistaken understanding of the theological commitments of dispensationalism. Such misunderstandings are not uncommon, and a generally sourced in historical considerations (often, the conjunction of beliefs characteristic of Dallas Theological Seminary in its dispensational heyday), rather than by an analysis of the system itself.

For instance, in Van Til's festschrift, C. Gregg Singer writes,

Not only was Christ the Redeemer made manifest in history in the flesh, but also Christ was the Lord of history. Van Til insists that Christ is now the Lord of history, and he would strongly dissent from the various forms of dispensationalism which seek to postpone this lordship until the millennial kingdom is established. He would strongly argue that dispensationalism makes a theistic view of history virtually impossible. Christ as Lord is now in sovereign control of his church even though his lordship is denied by the unbelieving world. The events of history obey his royal commands today as the winds and waves became still at his command two thousand years ago.<sup>24</sup>

He adds in a footnote to this paragraph, "It is sure that in Van Til's theology there is no room for premillennialism in any of its forms, historical or dispensational."<sup>25</sup>

It is hard to know what to make of this claim. There seems to be, in Singer's words, some kind of conceptual parallel between Christ's being the "Lord of history" and the fact that the "events of history obey his royal commands today." But this certainly conflates concepts that dispensational theology would labor to keep distinct. In essence, the accusation here would be that dispensationalism is required to be Arminian in its view of human affairs just so long as Jesus Christ is not functioning as the *Davidic* King in his promised Kingdom rule. While there might be Arminian dispensationalists who would permit such a construal of their thought, it is hardly of the essence of the dispensationalism to believe this, and any Calvinistic dispensationalist would reject this outright.

To take one example, McClain's central text on dispensationalism makes an explicit distinction between the "universal kingdom of God" and the "mediatorial kingdom." The latter, McClain and other

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<sup>24</sup>C. Gregg Singer, "A Philosophy of History," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1971), 334.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 479, n. 5.

dispensationalists argued, is currently not established on earth. The latter, which speaks to God's absolute sovereignty over all his creation, is always in effect. Indeed, McClain himself connects God's sovereignty over history (precisely the point under dispute) to the universal kingdom: "Nothing lies outside its vast reach and scope. It includes all things in space and time; in earth, in heaven, and in hell. The nations of the earth may rebel, follow other gods, even deny the existence of the true God; but all to no avail; Jehovah is still the 'King of nations' (Jer. 10:7)."<sup>26</sup>

Van Til himself seems to conflate Arminianism with dispensationalism. Writing for the Dutch publication *De Reformatie*, he links "het arminianisme en het chiliasme" [Arminianism and chiliasm].<sup>27</sup> Again, this is understandable from a historical point of view: very often, dispensationalists have taken a softer position on God's sovereignty than their more completely Reformed brethren. But again, unless someone can demonstrate an inherent conflict between a strong position on God's sovereignty and a dispensational understanding of redemptive history, there is no necessary reason to assume that a person advocating dispensational hermeneutics rejects an exhaustively personal notion of God's revelation in creation.

Van Til's apologetic is rooted in an explicitly Reformed theology. However, Van Til himself rarely made exegetical arguments for his approach to apologetics or appealed directly to the deeper structures of covenant theology (other than the broad sense of the covenant already discussed) to defend his apologetic method. In recent days, the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary have spearheaded an attempt to make these connections more explicit.

One such argument is found in Lane Tipton's *Resurrection, Proof, and Presuppositionalism*.<sup>28</sup> In this essay, an analysis of Paul's speech in Acts 17, Tipton insists, "An apologetic regulated by covenant-historical categories forms the theological foundation for Paul's address on Mars Hill. It is, therefore, simply impossible to separate in any meaningful way Paul's apologetic from his covenant theology."<sup>29</sup> As Tipton believes that a proper reading of this passage provides "an exegetical line of support for presuppositional apologetics in the tradition of Cornelius Van Til,"<sup>30</sup> it is fair to assume that Tipton would likewise argue that Van Til's apologetic cannot be divorced from covenant theology.

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<sup>26</sup>Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959), 24.

<sup>27</sup>"De Algemeene Synode," *De Reformatie* (18 Dec 1936): 94–95.

<sup>28</sup>Lane Tipton, "Resurrection, Proof, and Presuppositionalism," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007): 41–58. The other essays in that same volume are also worth consulting on this same theme.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 41.

Tipton’s core claim, which is utterly indisputable from a Van Tilian perspective, is that Paul’s appeal to the resurrection was not an attempt to build a case for Christianity on a foundation of a brute fact. That is to say, Paul is not assuming some kind of neutral stance, in which the resurrection of Jesus Christ functions as a mere event of history, though unusual. Instead, the substance of Paul’s address assumes the truth of the entire redemptive-historical framework of Scripture: “Paul does not argue with one set of presuppositions as a *theologian* and another set of presuppositions as an *apologist*. He is not methodologically schizophrenic.”<sup>31</sup>

Giving the constraints of Tipton’s article, he is not going to be able to present a full argument that Paul is a covenant theologian. His argument hinges on Acts 17:30–31: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (ESV). Tipton contends that the *now* of Paul’s argument “does not have an existential nuance, but has an *eschatological* nuance that derives its significance from the resurrection of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> That is to say, it speaks of the dawning of a new age.

There are multiple ways to address Tipton’s article. One could evaluate the degree to which his reading is indeed an accurate reflection of Paul’s theology. That, in my estimation, is a bigger topic than can be addressed here. Instead, given this exegetical argument for the covenantal basis for a Pauline (and thus Van Tilian) apologetic, we can profitably ask whether there is anything essential to Tipton’s reading that a dispensationalist is bound to reject.

Tipton argues that Paul’s argument here hangs on the covenantal headship that Jesus Christ sustains in relation to humanity. In Paul’s sermon, the proof that Jesus Christ has the position of eschatological judge is his resurrection from the dead: “To summarize, then, Paul presents the resurrection of Christ to his hearers as an eschatological event that inaugurates a new stage in redemptive history and guarantees the certainty of a future act of universal judgment.”<sup>33</sup> Minimally, this removes the resurrection from the class of brute facts that prove Christianity, for there is no neutral, secular reason to believe that being raised from the dead rationally demands that the one raised has been appointed as the eschatological judge of humanity.

But given a federal (that is, covenantal) understanding of Christ and his work, the fact that he has *already* undergone eschatological judgment at the cross and has been raised from it *is* in fact his qualification to be the final judge. For Paul’s argument to work, some kind of federal relationship between Christ and humanity is necessary. But it is

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 47–48.

still hard to find anything here that the dispensationalist is forced to reject. Because it is possible to affirm both dispensationalism and federal headship,<sup>34</sup> nothing in Tipton's construal of Paul's argument is finally incompatible with dispensationalism itself.

### CONCLUSION

In sum, Oliphint's proposal for renaming Van Til's apologetic has much to commend it. The term *presuppositionalist* does carry objectionable relativistic baggage. And the label *covenantal* indeed does get at a feature of Van Til's thought that is foundational to his distinctive approach to apologetics. This is not to say that *covenantal apologetics* is itself without weaknesses. Indeed, the very need for an article such as this suggests that this label also requires clarification and fuller explanation. If neither *presuppositional* nor *covenantal* can be employed as a label for Van Til without further qualification, it is hard to see that the work to make switch from the accepted terminology is worthwhile.

That said, there seems to be no reason for Calvinistic dispensationalists to object to the label *covenantal apologetics*; there is no incompatibility between these systems. One can be a dispensational, covenantal apologist.

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<sup>34</sup>For example, consider Rolland D. McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, vol. 2 (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 74–83.