

**Another Round of the Thomist Rumor Mill against Van Til:
Keith A. Mathison's "Christianity and Van Tillianism"**

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In the August 2019 issue of Ligonier Ministries's magazine *Tabletalk*, Keith Mathison writes a lengthy essay titled "Christianity and Van Tillianism," which is written from the perspective of Reformed Thomism in criticism of Cornelius Van Til's apologetic program. He has republished it in PDF format at academia.edu as well. J.V. Fesko published a book earlier this year, which I reviewed here, which also criticizes Van Til from the position of Reformed Thomism. Mathison makes many of the same arguments that Fesko and other Reformed Thomists, and more broadly, Protestant Thomists, have made against Van Til. Mathison continues the legacy of R.C. Sproul, who founded Ligonier Ministries, in defending classical apologetics against Van Til's presuppositional school. Mathison begins with a gracious introduction in which he acknowledges that Van Til was a brother in Christ, was dealing with complex issues, that neither he nor Van Til or infallible, and that we should not become mindless cheerleaders for either side. My comments here are offered in hopes of furthering a thoughtful discussion.

Yet, while Mathison is cordial and complimentary up front, he also suggests that Van Til's apologetic is "a monstrous synthesis of idealism and Christ." Many will recognize that he is returning the "favor" of Van Til calling Roman Catholic views a "monstrous synthesis of Aristotle and Christ." Mathison continues for several paragraphs saying that Van Til's use of some idealist terms have caused people to "question" whether Van Til adopted anti-Christian beliefs from idealism, yet Mathison admits that he can't find proof of Van Til's infidelity. Van Til at least cites specific statements by Aquinas and other well-known Catholic theologians as evidence that Roman Catholicism adopts some anti-Christian ideas from Aristotle. Readers are given material to examine and reach their own conclusions (even if Van Til could have provided citations of Aquinas more often than he did). Mathison does not do the same for Van Til. He says that Van Til used some idealist terminology, but then he admits that Van Til redefines the terms to fit Christian theology. Yet Mathison still charges Van Til with compromising

Christian theology by adopting tenants of idealist philosophy. Given this method that fails to produce a specific offending text, Mathison's charge against Van Til is nothing more than innuendo. Then there is the title of Mathison's essay. "Christianity and Van Tillianism" evokes the titles "Christianity and Liberalism" by Machen and Van Til's own "Christianity and Barthianism" and "Christianity and Idealism," all of which argued that the named "ism" was an abandonment Christianity. So while the opening paragraphs are very cordial, Mathison is trying to set up a knockdown punch against Van Til. But because Mathison tries to do it with innuendo rather than concrete arguments and evidence, his punches can't connect. If Van Til's views are compromised by anti-Christian ideas, then Van Til deserves to be punched, rhetorically. But Mathison fails to make his case.

In the discussion below, I begin with a quote from Mathison that is numbered and placed in italics, and then I follow with my comments. I use the page numbers from the PDF version published at academia.edu, and I reproduce his headings from the *TableTalk* version (the headings are slightly modified in the PDF version) as a further aid to those who are obsessed enough with this debate to follow the arguments in his lengthy essay and my somewhat detailed response.

PRESUPPOSING SCRIPTURE WITHOUT SCRIPTURE (p. 19)

1. . . *one of the most striking features of Van Til's writing is the almost complete lack of biblical exegesis in support of his numerous claims. There is, on occasion, a passing reference to Romans 1 and other texts, but for the most part, Van Til's works are filled with assertions grounded in no other authority than Van Til himself. This is not sufficient when one is asserting that much of what Reformed theologians have been teaching for the previous five centuries has been in error.* (p. 19)

Mathison doesn't give an example of a specific claim that he wants exegetical support for. Van Til defends against philosophical attacks the basic Reformed doctrines such as God's sovereignty, creation out of nothing with a beginning, a historical fall of the first human parents, total depravity, sovereign grace, and the infallible authority of the Bible. As a Reformed theologian, Mathison shouldn't need exegesis provided for those doctrines. Van Til does not teach that these doctrines taught for the previous five centuries are in error, but defends them. The teaching that is in error is in terms of holding to various philosophical ideas and ways of defending the faith that are inconsistent with basic Reformed doctrine. That's not a matter of exegesis but of logical analysis. To the extent that Van Til's apologetic

needs exegetical support, surely Mathison is aware of Greg Bahnsen's writings that provide exegetical support for presuppositionalism.¹ If Mathison is asking why Van Til did not provide exegetical support for positions like denying the existence of natural revelation and that unbelievers have no knowledge, that's because Van Til did not teach these things, as I'll show below.

A FUNDAMENTAL AMBIGUITY (p. 20)

2. *In an initial editorial introducing the articles, Cecil De Boer complained that Van Til "arbitrarily assigns new and unheard of meanings to certain technical terms in philosophy." Probably the most well-known example of this is Van Til's redefinition of the word analogical, a word that had an established history of usage in medieval and Reformed scholasticism. (pp. 20-21)*

How has Van Til redefined the word analogical? Mathison should explain this if he is going to make this charge, but he doesn't. Earlier in the essay, Mathison says, "As Van Til explains, 'Our ideas must correspond to God's ideas.' Human knowledge, therefore, is 'analogical.'" Surely Mathison does not disagree with that definition. He probably agrees with it and would argue that Aquinas agrees with it too, so Van Til should not have criticized Aquinas for his view of analogy. Van Til would not disagree that Aquinas makes several statements that agree with Van Til's definition of analogy; but Van Til further argues that Aquinas adopts an Aristotelian view of the form/matter scheme of reality that is inconsistent with the biblical sense in which man is an analog of God. By emphasizing that God is a concrete universal and that Aristotle's form/matter scheme is incompatible with it, Van Til is able to explain the analogy between God and man in the way that Aquinas wanted to but was unable because he undercut and confused the biblical view with the Aristotelian view.

Consider Aquinas's statement of his position in *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 13, Article 1: "Whether a name can be given to God." Aquinas wants to object to the claim that "no name can be given to God" and affirm the language of Scripture that gives names to God, replying, "On the contrary, It is written (Exodus 15:3): 'The Lord is a man of war, Almighty is His name.'" Yet Aquinas's Reply to Objection 1 actually affirms the objection! He writes: "Reply to Objection 1. The reason why God has no name, or is said to be above being named, is because His essence is above all that we

¹ Greg Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, Gary North, ed. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1979); and *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Covenant Media Foundation, 1996).

understand about God, and signify in word.” God cannot be named because Aquinas accepts the Aristotelian view of being, which makes God into a pure, abstract form. As Van Til often depicts Aquinas’s position, God is a “that” without a “what.”² Aquinas himself puts it this way: “God is a supremely simple form, as was shown above (Question [3], Article [7]). . . .Reason cannot reach up to simple form, so as to know ‘what it is;’ but it can know ‘whether it is.’”³ Van Til points out that it makes no sense to say that something exists when all conceptual content has been removed from that thing. And Van Til points out a further problem:⁴ Aquinas claims that God’s existence is His essence;⁵ therefore, if we can’t know God’s essence, then we can’t know of God’s existence. That’s the kind of trouble you get into by defining God as a purely abstract form. Aquinas wants to straddle a fence that separates opposing views. He thinks that he is riding two horses going the same direction, but he is really riding two horses going in opposite directions. He wants to have the Aristotelian metaphysics of form and matter that removes all content from God’s nature; but then he still wants to talk about God like the Bible does, as a definable, personal being. Can Aquinas say that we can’t know God and can’t use words to describe Him because He is a pure Form, with all content removed, and then say that there is still a way that we can know and talk about God? No, not without being inconsistent. We would have to consider God as having content to His nature, which would rule out regarding Him as a “supremely simple Form.” As Van Til puts it, “When he says that reason (by an Aristotelian method) can prove that God exists, this is pointless inasmuch as he adds that it cannot say what God is. And if he tones this contrast down sometimes by saying that man by reason can know something of the general characteristics of God, this is merely inconsistency.”⁶

But Aquinas still wants to hold the biblical position that we can know God and talk about Him, so, continuing in 1.13.1, Aquinas provides three ways that we can know God: “. . . but we know God from creatures as their principle, and also by way of excellence and remotion.” Briefly in response: Aquinas says that we can know God from his effects on creatures as their ultimate cause, but for God to

² In his letter to Francis Schaeffer, Van Til says, “When Aquinas seeks to prove that God exists without from the outset telling us from the outset what God is, he is talking about a pure abstraction. A that without a what is meaningless.” See also Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974), p. 161; and *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), p. 169.

³ *Summa Theologica* [1.12.12](#)

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), p. 99.

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, [1.3.4](#).

⁶ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 161.

be the cause of the diverse material world in the biblical sense of creating and planning it all (unlike Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, which can do neither), God cannot be an empty concept. God must be a thinking person with content to His nature, a "concrete universal" as Van Til puts it, in order to create the material world according to a detailed plan. The "way of excellence" (a.k.a, "way of eminence") suffers from the same problem. If God is a pure form, having no content to His nature, then God has no positive qualities of excellence that can be imparted to creatures on a finite level. As Van Til puts it, having defined God as pure form, "Thomas has no right at all to employ the 'way of eminence.'" ⁷ The third way of knowing God is called "remotion," also known by the terms "*via negativa*" and "*via negationis*." Remotion is where we remove all of the positive content from our knowledge of creatures to arrive at the knowledge of God. This process, again, leaves God as an empty concept. ⁸ Even on Aquinas's own admission, the methods of natural reason to know God cannot tell us "what it is" we know, ⁹ which means we really *don't know* God through natural reason. Aquinas wants to defend the God of the Bible, but he acquiesces to the God the Philosophers, eviscerating all content to God's nature and our knowledge of Him. On this basis, there can be no similarity between language of the material world and God, which means we cannot speak analogically of God.

Notice here that Van Til's objection to Aquinas is *not* that God's existence is not revealed through causation in nature or qualities of excellence in creatures, despite what even Van Til's student John Frame has claimed. ¹⁰ Rather, Aquinas has "no right" to appeal to these factors as proof for the existence of God given that Aquinas defines God's nature in a way that excludes these factors as revealing God. Likewise, Van Til's objection is not that Aquinas *merely* proves that God is the First Cause rather than proving all the biblical attributes of God, again as John Frame has claimed. ¹¹ No, Van Til's objection is that Aquinas fails to prove that God is the First Cause. Aquinas, based on Aristotle's view of form and matter, "could not rightfully claim that we can argue from effect to cause. There is no justification for thinking that the cause and effect relation obtains between the things with which

⁷ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 99.

⁸ See Aquinas's explanation of remotion in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [1:14.2](#).

⁹ *Summa Theologica* [1.12.12](#).

¹⁰ John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994), p. 71; *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2015), p. 74. See my essay, "A (Very) Critical Review of Frame the Fuzzy Van Tillian's Book Apologetics," http://christianciv.com/blog/index.php/2015/09/20/review_of_frames_apologetics/.

¹¹ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), p. 183. See my essay, "The Scope and Limits of Van Til's Transcendental Argument: A Response to John Frame," http://www.christianciv.com/The_Scope_and_Limits_of_VTAG.pdf.

human knowledge deals unless it be based upon the presupposition of the doctrine of the comprehensive plan of God.”¹²

Those who attempt to make sense of Aquinas on this issue of knowing of God’s existence apart from knowing His essence offer the following example:¹³ Let’s say that the essence of water is its molecular composition, H₂O. There are many people who don’t know the molecular composition of water, but they know what water is from the empirical effects of its molecules, like being colorless, odorless, liquid within a certain temperature range, and so on. Just as people can know water from the empirical effects of its essence without knowing the essence, H₂O, so humans can know God from the effects that He has on the material world even though we can’t know God’s essence. But this example does not work to rescue Aquinas because H₂O is an essence with content, but Aquinas specifically defines God’s essence as without content, as a “supremely simple form.”

Here is how Van Til explains the problem of Aquinas and analogy:

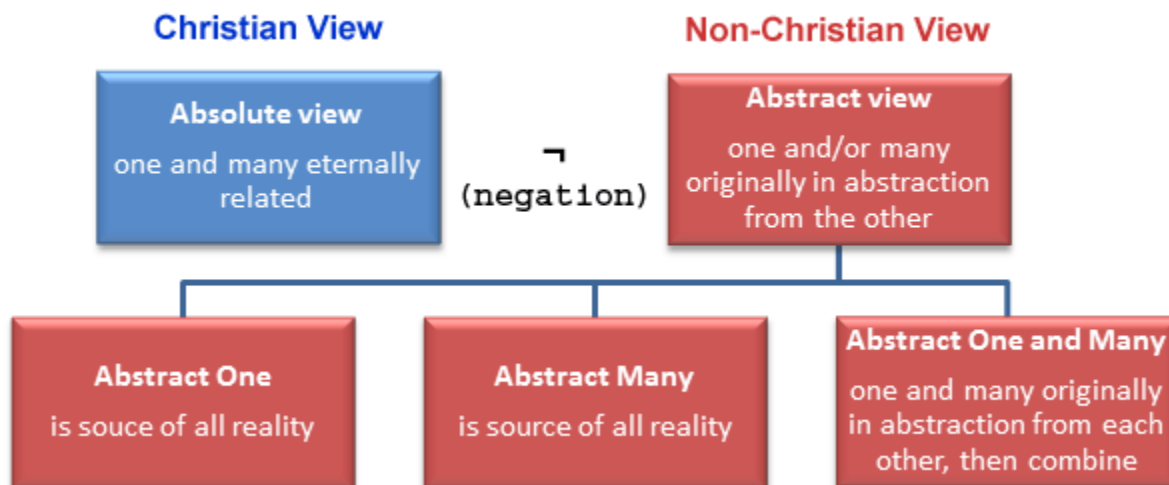
The Scholastics made the same mistake as the Greeks. Both took for granted that words must be used either simply univocally or simply equivocally. Both took for granted that every predicate used must apply to God in the same way that it applies to man or there can be no meaning in any predication at all. It is possible to produce quotations from Aquinas and the other Scholastics which seem to assert the contrary of this. Aquinas speaks of the necessity of analogical reasoning. But the point is that he is not consistent in this. He constantly reverted to the Greek position that it is reasonable and possible for man to engage in the attempt to solve these antinomies. Moreover, what Aquinas means by analogical reasoning is based upon the Aristotelian notion of analogy of being. This notion implies that the abstract rationality of Parmenides and the abstract diversity of Heraclitus are involved in one another. The Thomistic notion of analogical knowledge is therefore the direct opposite of the idea of analogical knowledge inherent in Augustine’s latest thinking. Augustine’s notion of analogy presupposes the biblical teachings of the Trinity, of creation, and of redemption, while the Thomistic notion of analogy is built on Aristotelian philosophy and, therefore, excludes these biblical presuppositions.¹⁴

¹² Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 173.

¹³ “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/#God>.

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), p. 60.

If the Aristotelian view is adopted, then the analogy between man and God must become a futile attempt to balance two principles that exclude each other: complete identification of man's being with God's being in terms of the Greek view of form, and complete separation of man from God in terms of the Greek view of matter. The Christian view does not require balancing these two principles that exclude each other like fire and water. God is the source of both form and matter, both the unity and diversity of our world, so God's creation has unity and diversity that is derived from God's on a finite scale. If Mathison wants to argue that Aquinas did not exclude content to God's nature by adopting Aristotle's view of form and matter, then Aquinas and his followers should agree with Van Til that God is a concrete universal. There is no third alternative. See the diagram below. Either the one and the many are eternally related in God, or the one and the many are originally abstract from each other. There are three options under the originally abstract view, and all sorts of diverse emphases within those views can be found in the history of philosophy, but they are all a negation of the absolute view. If one takes the absolute view, then there is no problem of using words to describe God. He is not "a supremely simple Form," so He has content to His nature that can be described in words. There is no problem saying that reason proves a creation with a beginning because matter originates from God just as much as the unity of our world does. An eternal world is inescapable if Form and Matter are originally separate and self-existing as the ancient Greek philosophers held.



3. *He also uses philosophical terms such as limiting concept and concrete universal in a way that differ from the way they were used by Kant, Hegel, and others. The problem with giving new definitions to*

technical terms with established definitions is that it inevitably causes confusion in the minds of readers who are familiar with those terms. It inevitably hinders clear communication, and there is no compelling reason to do it. (p.21)

First, note the irony that a Thomist would complain about bringing in terms from non-Christian philosophy to help explain Christianity. We don't find "simple form," "act," and "potency" used in the Bible in the way that Thomists use those words. At some point in history after the Bible was written, someone had to be the first to apply the term "simple form" from Greek philosophy to describe God; and Thomas Aquinas practices this appropriation of terms from non-Christian philosophy extensively. Van Til argues that Aquinas brought in non-Christian meanings along with his use of the terms; Aquinas did not redefine the terms as much as he should have. If Van Til is wrong, then he has been confused by Aquinas's lack of clarity by failing to distinguish how he is using terms in a different way than Aristotle did.

Giving new definitions to technical terms should not confuse readers if the author explains the difference between his usage and the previous usage. In my view, Van Til does that extensively. Furthermore, there can be a compelling reason to give a new definition to prior terms. Unbelieving intellectuals, even though they distort the truth in fundamental ways, still desire to make their case convincing to others. An author's description of how the world works has to have a ring of truth to his readers to be persuasive. It must fit what the readers have encountered in their attempts to understand the world. In the course of doing this, unbelieving intellectuals may hit upon some genuinely important concepts, descriptions, and issues. These terms may have to be adjusted to fit a Christian context, but when that is done, they can serve to better explain the way that Christianity provides the solutions to problems that arise when we attempt to understand the world. This applies to the terms "limiting concept" and "concrete universal."

As for the term "limiting concept," Van Til explains that Kant used this term in a way that borrowed from the Christian view of God, so it should not be too difficult to see how this term could be applied to Christian theology when placed in the orthodox Christian context:

It may be profitable to develop this criticism of the absolute ideal of science more fully by indicating what is meant by the fact that it is in modern times called a limiting concept. The absolute ideal is said to be a limit toward which man must strive. This notion of a limiting concept has had its first modern expression in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant used this idea of a limiting, or regulative, concept in contrast to the notion of a constitutive concept. He

said that we cannot actually by the employment of the categories of the understanding prove the existence of God. Yet we cannot do without the notion of God entirely. We need the notion of God as a correlative to the phenomenal universe. Human thought is itself constitutive. For that reason God's thought cannot be constitutive. Yet human thought is not comprehensive. For that reason it needs the notion of God as an ideal, as a limit toward which man must strive.¹⁵

Van Til sometimes distinguishes the Christian view from the Kantian view by saying that God in the Christian view is a "constitutive rather than a limiting concept."¹⁶ Other times he talks about Kant's view of God as "only as a limiting concept."¹⁷ Either way, his meaning is clear. For Kant, God is a limiting concept as the personification of a purely human ideal;¹⁸ whereas for the Christian, God is a limiting concept as a real, personal being. When Kant's term "limiting concept" is put back in an orthodox Christian context, it just means that God's knowledge is the limit of all knowledge, and that human knowledge is limited to what God reveals to us.¹⁹ Whereas for Kant, human knowledge is limited by the non-rational, in the Christian view, human knowledge is limited by absolute rationality – God. There is no non-rational, uninterpreted aspect of reality on the Christian view. All facts are originally interpreted by God from eternity past; man's interpretation must reflect God's in order to be true.

Also important to realize in regard to Mathison's charge is that, before Van Til used the term "limiting concept," there were neo-orthodox theologians using the term to describe their own views. They used Christian language, but that was really just a cover for Kantian philosophy. It was important for Van Til to address this issue by defining how the use of the term can be a cover for Kantian anti-theism, and how the term must be defined to make it consistent with Reformed orthodoxy. Van Til comments, "For Brunner, however, the idea of an absolute God is and must be nothing but a limiting conception. 'For our knowledge, the Absolute is no more—though also no less—than a necessary limiting conception.'"²⁰ Explaining the way in which "limiting concept" can be used in an orthodox sense and how it is used in an unorthodox sense is important in order to guard Christians from accepting non-Christian ideas because they are used in ways that are made to sound like Christian ideas.

¹⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ., 1978), p. 66.

¹⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947)p. 378.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 100.

¹⁹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), p. 11.

²⁰ Van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 173.

The term “concrete universal” comes from Hegel. The “absolute” is all of reality, and the concrete universal in its absolute form is the goal of history, which is fully self-conscious interpretation that envelopes every fact in all reality. For the Christian, full self-consciousness of every fact in all reality happened in eternity past in the mind of God in His exhaustive plan for the universe. The problem of the “one and the many,” which is general enough and important enough to crop up throughout the history of philosophy, is answered in the view that God is the source of all unity and diversity – the source of all facts and all the concepts that apply to them. Calling God the concrete universal is helpful for conveying to unbelievers that the Christian view of God addresses this problem that unbelievers wrestle with, and it can also help Christians understand their own view of God better and how it relates to various philosophical issues. Likewise, when Christians say that God is “absolute,” they can make use of Hegel’s terminology to explain that in a philosophically relevant way while also distinguishing Hegel’s monistic view from the Christian view of God and the Creator/creation distinction.

4. *The lack of clarity in Van Til’s thought is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in his claims about what, if anything, unbelievers know. This is significant because this point is one of the central elements of Van Til’s system of thought. As observed above, Van Til repeatedly makes unqualified statements to the effect that unbelievers know nothing truly. The unbeliever cannot even look at a tree and know that it is a tree. And yet, in other places, Van Til will say that unbelievers do have true knowledge of many things, including trees. As we observed above, Van Til does address the issue in terms of different points of view, but he also admitted that he could not provide a fully satisfactory solution to this theological problem. He simply made both kinds of assertions about the knowledge of unbelievers and claimed that truly Reformed Christians have to accept both. Even contemporary proponents of Van Tillian presuppositionalism have noted the problem. John Frame, for example, says that Van Til never completely solved the problem of how to relate the antithesis to common grace. (pp. 22-23)*

On the one hand, Mathison says, “Van Til does address the issue in terms of different points of view,” but then he turns around and says, “He simply made both kinds of assertions about the knowledge of unbelievers and claimed that truly Reformed Christians have to accept both.” The first statement nullifies the second. Van Til did not simply make both kinds of assertions; he explains the difference in terms of different points of view.

There are a few statements where Van Til could have added something like “according to the unbeliever’s God-denying principles” in order to make clear that he was not denying that unbelievers lack all knowledge, but Van Til makes this qualification many, many times. Any careful reader of Van Til writings should have known what Van Til was saying given his writings as a whole. John Frame is a favorite citation for Van Til’s critics on this issue. As a supporter of Van Til in many areas, he has added to the critics’ case that Van Til denied that the unbeliever has any knowledge by saying that Van Til sometimes wrote as if he held that view. Yet, Frame recounts that when he wrote papers for Van Til in seminary making this criticism, Van Til corrected him that that was not what he meant:

When I was a student, I wrote a paper quoting and criticizing what seemed to me to be rather extreme expressions of antithesis in his writings. Alongside my quotations, Van Til wrote several times in the margin “according to their principle,” “in their systems,” etc. Note: “And it is of these systems of their own interpretation that we speak when we say that men are as wrong in their interpretation of trees as in their interpretation of God.”²¹

After having received this clarification from the author himself, the only criticism that Frame should have made is that Van Til meant for these qualifications to be understood but he did not make the qualifications as clear as he could have. Saying that Van Til actually taught that the unbeliever does not have knowledge in any sense is irresponsible. I have argued elsewhere that Frame’s criticisms of Van Til are inaccurate.²²

Van Til argues that according to their ultimate philosophical commitments, the unbeliever can know nothing. Their ultimate philosophical commitment to an impersonal origin to the universe undermines the possibility of rationality. But since their view of the universe is not true, since the origin of the universe really is an absolutely rational God and since man is made in God’s image, unbelievers are able to have knowledge. Van Til often says that this knowledge, though “true as far as it goes,” is not “true knowledge” *in the sense that* (this is important) they place it in a false context of their false view of reality. The unbeliever can look outside and see a tree. He knows that a tree is there. But the unbeliever does not “truly” know the tree because he explains the tree as having its origin completely

²¹ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), p. 198.

²² “The Scope and Limits of Van Til’s Transcendental Argument: A Response to John Frame,” at http://www.christianciv.com/The_Scope_and_Limits_of_VTAG.pdf; and “A (Very) Critical Review of Frame the Fuzzy Van Tillian’s Book Apologetics,” at http://christianciv.com/blog/index.php/2015/09/20/review_of_frames_apologetics/.

from mindless matter and energy rather than as intelligently designed by God. Van Til sometimes describes this as the difference between principle and practice: “Yet the absolute antithesis is one of principle only. And principles do not come to full expression in human life until the end of history. In practice therefore, the non-Christian can know and teach much that is right and true.”²³ In principle unbelievers can know nothing, but in practice they know a great deal, often more than Christians know.

Mathison finds this instance where Van Til says in regard to the unbeliever, “I have never denied that he has true knowledge.” Mathison responds, “How can Van Til deny saying something that he says over and over again?” He’s not. Read the context. He explains that the true knowledge of the unbeliever here is natural revelation from God that is implanted in man’s mind and in man’s environment. This knowledge is no longer “true” when the unbeliever distorts it by placing it in a God-denying interpretive scheme of reality. Here is the quote in context:

I have never denied that he has true knowledge. My appeal has constantly been to Calvin’s position. Calvin argues that as created in God’s image every man, of necessity, has a knowledge of God. This “innate knowledge” is correlative to God’s revelation in man’s environment. And try as he may the sinner cannot efface this knowledge. He can only seek to suppress it.²⁴

As he puts it in another place, men in general “are first of all truth *possessors*, or truth-knowers, who have, by sinning, become truth *suppressors*.”²⁵ Van Til often emphasizes that man is given inescapable, clear, true knowledge of God through natural revelation (in contrast to Aquinas’s claim of an obscure natural knowledge of God derived solely from sense experience), as I laid out in my first essay in response to Fesko’s book.²⁶

In summary, Van Til distinguishes three states of man’s knowledge:

1. All men receive inescapable, true, clear knowledge of God through natural revelation, which comes through man’s own consciousness (innate) and every fact of God’s creation (acquired).

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979), p. 83. Also, “the fall of man as involving the principle that the sinner is *in principle* desirous of suppressing the truth but is in practice restrained from fully doing so by God’s common grace,” in Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), p. 281 (emphasis in original). And see, Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 225.

²⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 285.

²⁵ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 17 (emphasis in original).

²⁶ “Common Notion Confusion: Part 1 of a Review of J.V. Fesko’s Reforming Apologetics,” (5/25/2019), <http://christianciv.com/blog/index.php/2019/05/25/common-notion-confusion-part-1-of-a-review-of-j-v-feskos-reforming-apologetics/>.

2. Fallen men suppress the truth that they receive from God by adopting false principles of interpreting the world; in this way their expressions of knowledge are, to the extent that they are not completely false, “true as far as it goes” but are not true “in principle.”
3. Redeemed men have the principles of their interpretive scheme corrected by the Holy Spirit and Scripture, which gives them knowledge that is true in principle and clearer than natural revelation, although the redeemed imperfectly adhere to the principles revealed to them in Scripture this side of Glory.

Is the distinction that Van Til makes between principle and practice really that hard to understand? The implication of naturalistic evolution is that humans are just bags of molecules. But these evolutionists still act as if other humans have value that exceeds that of a dirt clod, and they act as if other humans have a unified, intentional consciousness that persists through time rather than just being a collection of matter in flux. Their principles don't match their practice. In conformity to their anti-theism, unbelievers often say that all morality is relative, but then they make moral denunciations in absolute terms against “oppression” in various forms (e.g. Marx in terms of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat). In principle unbelievers should reject absolute morality, but in practice they don't always do that. Nonbelievers are in rebellion against God, but they are not as depraved as they could be if they were consistent with their rebellious principles of interpretation. On the flip side, Christians act inconsistently with their belief that God exists and that they should always obey God's word. Are these not understandable distinctions between principle and practice? Is a person's failure to live consistently with the principles that the person professes to believe incomprehensible to Thomists? Can Thomists not understand that people can hold to a philosophical principle that conflicts with and undermines other beliefs that they have, while claiming no conflict? Toby Sumpter, in his [review](#) of Mathison's essay, puts it well when he said, “The space between formal positions and *de facto* positions are the hallmarks of hypocrites, pharisees, legalists, and to some extent, every stripe of sinner.” I think Protestant Thomists probably recognize such distinctions all the time. But they have been trained to treat Van Til's use of the distinction as confusing.

When Mathison says that Van Til “also admitted that he could not provide a fully satisfactory solution to this theological problem,” what he – and Frame – miss here is that Van Til is not saying that his principle/practice distinction is faulty and unclear, but that with any particular statement of a nonbeliever, distinguishing the common grace from the rebellion is not always easy: “The actual situation is therefore always a mixture of truth and error. Being ‘without God in the world’ the natural

man yet knows God, and, in spite of himself, to some extent recognizes God.”²⁷ *He says that the idea of an antithesis in principle is necessary to give some clarity to the situation of fallen man’s thinking being a mixture of truth and error: “In order to hem in our question we are persuaded that we must begin by emphasizing the absolute ethical antithesis in which the ‘natural man’ stands to God. . . . From this ultimate point of view the ‘natural man’ knows nothing truly.”*²⁸ By rejecting God, in principle the unbeliever has rejected all truth and undermined the intelligibility of all reality. But they are not completely consistent in their rebellion against God.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD (p. 25)

5. *In one place, Van Til appears to define person in terms of consciousness, saying in connection with his discussion of God as one person and three persons that “God is a one-conscious being, and yet, he is also a tri-conscious being.” Why is this definition such a problem? Because Van Til also claims that in God, being and consciousness are coterminous. Van Til says, “It should be noted that it is only if we hold to the coterminosity of the being and the consciousness of God that we can avoid pantheism.” But if God is “a one-conscious being, and yet, he is also a tri-conscious being” and if consciousness is coterminous with being, then we potentially have a God who is not only “one person and three persons” but also “one being and three beings.”* (pp.26-27)

By “the coterminosity of being and the consciousness of God” Van Til is simply saying that God is fully self-aware. God’s consciousness extends to every aspect of His being (unlike with pantheism). I doubt that Mathison disagrees with that. Van Til specifically says that by “coterminosity of the knowledge and being of God,”²⁹ he is not claiming that being and consciousness are two terms for the same thing: “It is, of course, true that we must distinguish between God’s knowledge and his being. This as true as that we must distinguish between the various attributes of God.”³⁰

6. *The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of God in terms of “three persons, of one substance” (2.3). . . . Yet by redefining the Trinity as “one person and three persons,” Van Til is at least implying*

²⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

that the teaching of the Reformed confessions is in error on a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. (pp. 28, 29)

Van Til does not deny that God is one substance. He says that “we are permitted and compelled by Scripture to make the distinction between a specific or generic type of being, and three personal subsistences.”³¹ Denying that God is one substance would be equivalent to denying that God is one being and that the three Persons are one God. There is no reasonable way to get out of Van Til’s statement that “God is one person” that the three persons are not one God. Just the opposite. Van Til is emphasizing that the unified nature of God is personal. He is adding a quality to “substance,” not taking anything away. Mathison acknowledges that the Bible portrays God as speaking as one Person, even though Mathison doesn’t like this language because it is from the Old Testament and prior to the New Testament revelation of the Trinity (p. 28, n. 127). But the New Testament does not abandon the unity of God’s will and knowledge within the Trinity, which is what Van Til is emphasizing.

Van Til defends his formulation of God as one person by quoting Charles Hodge on perichoresis:

As the essence of the Godhead is common to the several persons, they have a common intelligence, will and power. There are not in God three intelligences, three wills, three efficiencies. The three are one God, and, therefore, have one mind and will. This intimate union was expressed in the Greek Church by the word *perichooresis*, which the Latin words *‘inexistentia,’ ‘inhabitatio’* and *‘intercommunio,’* were used to explain.³²

Ligonier Ministries endorses the teaching of perichoresis to describe God.³³ It is especially strange that a defender of “classical theism” would object to calling God one person. In a book that Mathison endorses, James Dolezal says that “each attribute is identical with His essence.”³⁴ God is personal, so his essence is personal. As Hodge says, perichoresis includes attributes of a person: mind and will. There is unity of knowledge and will between the three Persons. Van Til’s formulation of the Trinity is not a denial of the traditional formulations, but rather the doctrine of “three persons, one substance” combined with the doctrine of perichoresis. The unity of God’s being is the unity of qualities of a person, even while there are three individual personalities distinguishable within that unity.

³¹ Ibid., p. 230.

³² Ibid., p. 225; quoting Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 461.

³³ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/perichoresis/>.

³⁴ James E. Dolezal, *All that is in God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Book, 2017), p. 42.

The problem for classical theism as defined by Aquinas, Mathison, and Dolezal is accounting for the Trinity when their view of God's simplicity strips all complexity from God's nature. Dolezal says, "It further follows from God's non-compositeness that all His attributes are really identical with each other. . . . Swinnock likewise asserts that God's attributes 'are one indivisible essence, to will and to understand, and to love and to hate, and to be, are all the same and one in God.'"³⁵ Dolezal says that humans speak of these attributes applying to God as if they were different from each other because of our limitations as finite creatures.³⁶ How then can any genuine distinctions be maintained between the Persons of the Trinity? Are the distinctions between the Father, Son, and Spirit merely an imperfect, creaturely way of talking about that which is identical? Dolezal tries to rescue his view of divine simplicity from this implication concerning the Trinity by saying in regard to the Persons of the Trinity, "Otherness . . . is proper and irreducible in any relation."³⁷ He says the relations between the Persons of the Trinity contrast with the attributes of God in that "None of the essential attributes of God is a relation."³⁸ But first, merely saying that otherness in relations is irreducible only highlights the problem. If the relations of the Trinity can't be reduced to pure unity, and if God is pure unity, then God can't be a Trinity. And second, is it true that "none of the essential attributes of God is a relation"? Is not love and hate an oppositional relation? They are dispositions that exclude each other, at least when applied to the same object (such as a certain behavior of a person).

Philosophically, Van Til says that God is one Person because he is concerned to deny the charge that personhood does not apply to the unity of God's nature, so that God's substance is "uninterpreted being of some sort,"³⁹ extending beyond the minds of the triune Persons. Van Til argues that if that were true, God's absolute rationality would be denied in favor of a finite rationality of each individual member of the Trinity. In that case, God would not be the source of universal concepts, nor would anything else, which would undermine the possibility of rationality for God and for His creatures. God's mind would be finite, with a non-rational being extending beyond His mind. This would destroy the simplicity of God's being. It would mean that God has to gain knowledge of his own nature discursively, "by a process of investigation of a being that exists independently of himself."⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 229; also see 215-16.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 235.

7. However, in some places, Van Til makes statements about immutability that are unclear in their meaning. He says in one place, for example: "Whether Adam was to obey or to disobey, the situation would be changed. And thus God's attitude would be changed." Does this mean that God changes? In the same context, Van Til indicates that God's attitude changes but that "God in Himself is changeless." But what exactly are "attitudes" in God, and how are they distinguished from "God in Himself"? Van Til's answer to that question remains unclear. (p. 30)

Mathison is "unclear" about how God could be changeless if His attitudes change because he is assuming the "classical" view that there is absolutely no change in God. On this view, there are no "accidents" in the nature of God; therefore, since God is unchanging in His essential nature, then God is completely changeless.⁴¹ I don't see Van Til sharing this view, and Mathison can see that. But rather than exegetically and philosophically defend God's immutability in the Parmenidean sense, Mathison merely assumes in this essay that any other view doesn't make sense.

The Unmoved Mover of Aristotle's philosophy is not only unmoved by other things, it is unmoving, completely static. It "causes" the world to move because the world loves (desires) the Unmoved Mover, like a dog would be moved toward meat by the desire for it.⁴² Aristotle's Unmoved Mover does not willfully cause the world to move any more than meat wills the movement of a dog toward it. This may be puzzling to those who remember that the Unmoved Mover is called "pure Act" by Aristotelians (who, I think, get confused by their own language). But they define "pure Act" as lacking any potential for change. A better name for "pure Act," then, would be "pure inaction" or "pure impotence."⁴³ Aristotle's Unmoved Mover doesn't create the world or even have knowledge of the world.⁴⁴ Both matter and the Unmoved Mover are eternal. This is what Aquinas and his followers want to equate with the God of the Bible. Van Til comments, "We are again to be on the alert lest we confuse Christian with non-Christian thought on the question of the immutability of God. . . . [S]urely in the case of Aristotle the immutability of the divine being was due to its emptiness and internal immobility. No greater contrast is thinkable than that between the unmoved *noesis noeeseos* [thought thinking itself] of Aristotle and the Christian God."⁴⁵ Only because God has internal activity is He able to be the Creator of our complex, moving world: "And because he is life in himself and internal activity, the God of

⁴¹ Dolezal, *All that is in God*, pp. 25-26.

⁴² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.7.

⁴³ See my essay, "A Thomistic Transcendental Argument that Needs Van Til," <http://christianciv.com/blog/index.php/2017/11/06/thomistic-transcendental-argument/>.

⁴⁴ On matter being eternal: Aristotle, *Physics*, VIII. 1. On the Unmoved Mover only thinking of itself: Aristotle *Metaphysics*, XII.9.

⁴⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 210.

Christianity, unlike the god of Aristotle, could become the self-contained source of the created universe.”⁴⁶ Aquinas admits that he can’t prove that the universe has a beginning rather than existing eternally, so he says that the universe having a beginning must be an article of faith.⁴⁷ The problem with that stance is that Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover *could not* be a creator of the universe. An empty abstraction does not have the power to do anything. We must reject the existence of the Unmoved Mover in order to embrace the existence of the God of the Bible who created all things by His will. In this case, faith cannot take over where reason leaves off. Reasoning according to Aristotelian assumptions leads to different conclusions than what the Christian faith teaches.

In the “classical” view, the immutability of God goes hand-in-hand with the simplicity of God, which they define as the denial that there are any distinctions that can be made in God. A change in God from an attitude of favor to an attitude of judgment, as Van Til mentions for Adam based on his obedience or disobedience, violates God’s simplicity as well as His immutability because it introduces differences within God’s being. On this view of divine simplicity, as Dolezal confirms in the quote above, there could be no real distinction between God’s grace and God’s wrath. They are *exactly* the same in reality; they just seem different from our limited, distorted human point of view. Pick any alternative attitudes or actions that you see describing God in the Bible, they can’t really be true.

One of the criticisms of the “classical” view of God is that nearly all the passages in the Bible that talk about God, except a handful of verses that say that God is unchanging, must be taken as presenting a false view of the true nature of God. And those handful about God being unchanging present the “classical” view of God only when read in the light of Greek philosophy. Signing on as a card-carrying Van Tillian is not necessary to see this; just deciding to read the Bible without ancient Greek glasses is enough. Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, living a generation before Van Til, rejected the simplicity of God as the complete identity of God’s attributes, as Dolezal notes,⁴⁸ even though Hodge taught perichoresis of the Persons of the Trinity. Does the statement that something is unchanging mean that that being is unchanging in every sense? Usually not. I am unchanging in regard to being a human, but I still change in many ways. Of course, I change morally between good and evil; and God does not; but just because God does not change in one respect does not mean that He does not change in other ways. Yet according to promoters of “classical” Christian doctrine about God, all the passages speaking of God beginning and ending some action or attitude don’t really mean that God began or ended some action,

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁷ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [1:13.29-30](#); *Summa Theologica* [1a.46.2](#).

⁴⁸ Dolezal, *All that is in God.*, p. 72.

because that would mean that God changed in some way, which is forbidden when read in terms of classical Greek rationalism.

Dolezal and other Thomists argue that perichoresis is not sufficient to avoid polytheism.⁴⁹ One might hold to perichoresis and also claim that the three divine persons were once separate divine persons who at some point decided to have their substances permeate each other. After all, perichoresis has been used to describe Christ's two natures, yet there was a point in time when they became joined; Christ's human nature does not exist eternally in the past in union with the divine nature. The Thomists say that the only way to avoid the possibility of polytheism is the Parmenidean argument that any change in being results in a new being,⁵⁰ therefore the unity of God's being is possible only if all change is excluded. By logical necessity then, the unity of God is a timeless, static unity that excludes all distinctions within God's being.

Van Til has another way to argue for the necessity of God's eternal unity: his transcendental argument that God is a concrete universal. As a concrete universal, the One and the Many are equally ultimate in God. They are *eternally* related. This is *necessarily* so for the possibility of rationality. God as a concrete universal means that all concepts are applied to all facts from all eternity in the mind of God. An abstract unity (the One of Greek philosophy) is an empty concept and defined to exclude all diversity. Knowledge requires content; therefore an abstract unity cannot be the source of knowledge. An abstract plurality is just pure chaos. With no order (e.g., no laws of logic, no universals), there can be no knowledge. Combining the two to form the intelligible realm of "becoming" where humans live (as presented in Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies) fails to yield the order with content required for knowledge because each excludes the other. It is an attempt to combine two irrational elements, chaos plus a blank, to form the rational world. Van Til famously compares such an approach to a futile attempt to string beads with no holes (chaotic diversity) on a string with no ends (an empty universal). Rationality in the universe can be explained by an ultimately rational source for the universe, but an ultimately irrational source for the universe cannot explain the rationality of the universe.

Van Til teaches about the simplicity of God by using a term that he uses much more often than "simplicity," which is "self-contained." For God to be "self-contained" means that His being is not derived from anything outside of Him and that He is the self-sufficient source of all reality. Aristotle's Unmoved Mover fails this test of simplicity because it is not the self-sufficient source of all reality, just

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 129-30.

⁵⁰ *Poem of Parmenides*, VIII.

the source of abstract unity: “If he were the abstract one of Aristotle, he would be nothing but the correlative of the universe, and would therefore have no control over it.”⁵¹

8. *According to Van Til, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism have nothing in common on any point of doctrine.* (p. 32)

Mathison doesn't cite a specific statement by Van Til where he says this; he merely references two pages in Van Til's book *Christian Apologetics*. I guess that he is referring to these sentences: “And so it comes to pass that the Roman Catholic doctrines of faith are in every instance adjusted to the idea of human autonomy. To be sure, the natural man is said to be fallen, but he has fallen but a little way; even in the state of rectitude he justly insisted on autonomy.”⁵² Notice here that Van Til acknowledges that Roman Catholics teach that man is fallen, so there is that point of doctrine in common with Protestants. Van Til's argument is that, because Aristotle's philosophy is inconsistent with the Christian view of reality in fundamental ways, the Roman Catholic attempt to thoroughly integrate the two undermines Christian theology in every doctrine. Roman Catholics can't be exhaustively successful integrating the two because that would result in obliterating one in favor of the other. As Van Til explains in other places, in regard to the nature of man before the fall, Roman Catholics introduce the *donum superadditum* in an attempt to integrate the Greek worldview into Christianity, which undermines Adam and Eve's pre-Fall perfection (as I mentioned in the [review](#) of Fesko's book); and after the fall, Roman Catholics deny or do not consistently hold to the doctrines of total depravity and sovereign grace, which is also a compromise of Christian doctrine that is necessitated by the Greek worldview.

Van Til never says anywhere that “Roman Catholicism and Protestantism have nothing in common on any point of doctrine.” For Mathison to think that such a statement fairly characterizes Van Til's criticism of Roman Catholicism reveals Mathison's significant ignorance of Van Til's views. Van Til's argument throughout his writings is that Roman Catholicism is *inconsistent* in its proclamation of Christian doctrines. It's a “a straddling position” between Christianity and paganism.⁵³ Roman Catholics profess belief in Christian doctrine on many points, but then they try to integrate the form/matter scheme from Aristotelean philosophy, which is incompatible with Christianity. Van Til says that

⁵¹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 211, also see p. 216.

⁵² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 89–90.

⁵³ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 10.

“Thomas, the theologian,” wants to defend the Triune Creator who communicates through an infallible Bible, while “Thomas, the philosopher,” wants to view God and man in terms of the Greek scale of being, crowned with an Unmoved Mover who does not know the world and could not communicate with the world.⁵⁴ Mathison may disagree with Van Til’s argument about how the form/matter scheme undermines Christian teaching, but he doesn’t even acknowledge the argument, much less provide a response to it.

9. *Classical realism, therefore, must be rejected. But if the metaphysical framework that provided the context for the church’s development, formulation, and defense of the doctrine of God is rejected, then that doctrine of God itself becomes problematic.* (pp. 32-33)

There are a lot of things that were part of “the context for the church’s development, formulation, and defense of the doctrine of God,” but to make this a refutation of Van Til, Mathison must show that the church’s doctrine of God would fall apart without classical realism, which for Van Til refers to the form/matter scheme of Aristotle’s and Plato’s philosophies. Does Mathison make that case? No. In an endnote, Mathison says, “In using the word *ousia*, Christians were using a word that had a history in Greek philosophy. Likewise, Christological discussions of the ‘natures’ of Christ borrowed words and concepts from Greek philosophy.” If every Greek word must carry with it the entire history of its meaning as used by pagans, then writing the New Testament in Greek would have been impossible. “Logos” could never refer to a transcendent Creator, for example. For Mathison’s criticism here to count against Van Til, he needs to demonstrate that using these Greek terms necessarily commits one to the Greek form/matter scheme of reality. Mathison doesn’t do that because 1) he is unaware that this is the heart of Van Til’s criticism of Greek philosophy, and 2) he thinks that Van Til is just plain prejudiced against Aristotle, which does not require an argument in response since prejudice is not based on argument.

10. *Van Til seems to grant the possibility of “elements of truth” in any non-Christian system of thought except Aristotelianism.* (p. 33, n. 144)

⁵⁴ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* p. 96.

Here's Mathison's claim that Van Til opposed Aquinas's use of Aristotle out of some arbitrary prejudice against Aristotle. But is it true? No. Strangely, Mathison even quotes this passage earlier in his paper (pp. 13-14) where Van affirms that Christians can learn some things from Aristotle:

It should be carefully noted that our criticism of this procedure does not imply that we hold it to be wrong for the Christian church to make formal use of the categories of thought discovered by Aristotle or any other thinker. On the contrary, we believe that in the Providence of God, Aristotle was raised up of God so that he might serve the church of God by laying at its feet the measures of his brilliant intellect. When Solomon built the temple of God he was instructed to make use of the peculiar skill and the peculiar gifts of the pagan nation that was his neighbor.⁵⁵

11. *If history is any guide, Van Til's rejection of the older philosophy will eventually result in the denial of classical theism by some who follow his lead.* (p. 36)

Before he tries to predict people's future behavior (the slippery slope fallacy), Mathison needs to prove that Van Til's philosophy *logically entails* the denial of the biblical view of God, which Mathison does not prove. (I am saying "biblical" rather than "classical" because, while Van Til agrees with the historic creeds of the church, obviously there are statements in the writings of theologians prior to the Reformation that Van Til disagrees with.) Rather than make the logical case, Mathison makes logically unrelated comparisons. He says that "post-Enlightenment philosophers" abandoned the philosophical framework of the Middle Ages, leading them to abandon Trinitarian theism; therefore Van Til's abandonment of the philosophy of the Middle Ages could lead to his followers abandoning Trinitarian theism. But that only works if he can show that Van Til's view are logically equivalent to post-Enlightenment views, which they are not – and far from it. Mathison's argument is like a Roman Catholic arguing that atheists reject the authority of the Pope, and Protestants reject the authority of the Pope, therefore Protestantism entails atheism and Protestants will eventually become atheists. This ignores the differences in the arguments that the two groups have relied on to reach similar conclusions.

In fact, Van Til argues that it is a short trip from Aristotle's form/matter scheme to Kant's freedom/nature scheme.⁵⁶ A god who cannot be known or named because all human knowledge arises

⁵⁵ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 57.

⁵⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1962), p. 380.

from sensation and this god is pure form rather than a sensible object,⁵⁷ is substantially the same as Kant's god who cannot be known or named because all human knowledge arises from sensation and his god is in the noumenal realm rather than the phenomenal realm. Kant argued that the historical accounts in the Bible of revelation and God's intervention into history at particular times must all be considered temporal descriptions of what are actually atemporal truths.⁵⁸ Likewise, Thomists, when being most consistent with Aristotle, argue that accounts of God speaking at particular points in history are metaphorical ways of describing a god who cannot change, and thus cannot interact in particular ways with man at particular points in the flow of history. Because Aquinas holds that our knowledge of being arises from sensation and is limited to composites of form and matter, Van Til describes his theory of knowledge as "a sort of pre-Kantian phenomenalism."⁵⁹

Hans Küng famously argued in his book *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* that there is not much distance separating Karl Barth's Kantian "Protestantism" from Roman Catholic theology, and Van Til argues that there is even less distance than Küng claimed.⁶⁰ The ecumenical movement between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism finds its unity in the "Aristotle-Christ-Kant Synthesis."⁶¹ Aquinas tried to unequally yoke Christianity to Aristotelianism, but Aristotle and Kant are natural bedfellows. Mathison should respond to the claim of the idealist leanings of his own view.

POOR HISTORICAL THEOLOGY (p. 36)

12. *Van Til asserts throughout his writings that Aquinas denied the Creator-creature distinction and taught that God and His creation exist on a scale of being.* (p. 37)

No. Van Til says, for instance, "As for Thomas, he does defend the idea of creation."⁶² Van Til argues that the *logical implication* of Aquinas's adoption of Aristotle's form/matter scheme is a scale of being rather than the Creator-creature distinction taught in the Bible. Van Til recognizes that Aquinas

⁵⁷ *Summa Theologica* [1a.12.12](#), [1a.88.1](#), [1a.88.3](#).

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Religions Within the Bounds of Pure Reason*.

⁵⁹ Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," p. 289. Van Til quotes Aquinas in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [2.43.4](#).

⁶⁰ Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism.*, Ch. 14.

⁶¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Sovereignty of Grace: An Appraisal of G. C. Berkouwer's View of Dordt* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), p. 25. On Barth's Kantianism, also see Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947), pp. 52ff.

⁶² Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 172.

taught that there is a Creator-creature distinction because it is taught in the Bible, but Aquinas also tried to explain God and creation in terms of Greek philosophy in which there is no Creator or creation. Instead, the Greek view is that reality is constituted by a mixture of form and matter on a scale of being, with pure form having pure being and with matter arising from and tending to non-being. If God is a supremely simple form in terms of Greek philosophy, then He can't create anything. In that case He is not a Person but an it – an empty, static concept of pure unity.⁶³ Given this view, there can be no Creator-creature distinction. By necessity on this view, anything with being is part of the same being as every other being, including the being of the Supreme Being. And any distinction between beings is because of “matter” which arises from non-being and is not a creation of Aristotle's god.

The Aristotelian view of knowledge involves the view that knowledge is identical with the object of knowledge. Van Til quotes Aristotle saying, “Actual knowledge is identical with its object of knowledge. . . . When the mind is set free from its present conditions it appears as just what it is and nothing more: this alone is immortal and eternal.”⁶⁴ Van Til points out that, putting this view in Christian language, this means that “To the extent that man knows God from knowing himself he must also *be* God.”⁶⁵ This view of knowledge wipes out the Creator-creature distinction. Rather than man's consciousness receiving revelation from his Creator, man's consciousness is divine.

Thomas applies biblical terminology of “Creator” and “creature” to talk about the distinction between God and nature, but then he slips into scale-of-being language. For example, when Aquinas says that God has goodness in the highest degree, as in the fourth of the five ways to prove God's existence,⁶⁶ that, by itself, could be compatible with either the biblical Creator/creature distinction or a Greek scale of being. But as Aquinas discusses the fourth way, he says, “for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. II.*” Equating truth with being, and citing Aristotle making the same argument (“as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth” [*Meta.*, 2.993b]), puts the context of the discussion of degrees of perfection into the Greek form/matter view of reality rather than the biblical view of Creator-creature distinction.⁶⁷ When, in another discussion in *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas equates being with goodness, saying that “every being, as being, is good,”⁶⁸ he again is putting the issue of goodness in terms of a scale of being rather than a biblical distinction between Creator and creation, because in the latter case goodness is a matter

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 302. Also see *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 216.

⁶⁴ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 87, quoting Aristotle's *De Anima*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ *Summa Theologica*, [1a.2.3.](#)

⁶⁷ The same argument, with the same citation to Aristotle, is found in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [1.13.34.](#)

⁶⁸ *Summa Theologica*, [1a.5.3.](#)

of the creature's will obeying God's transcendent law, not a matter of participation in being. Scripture speaks of evil in purely ethical terms, not metaphysical terms.

Of course, Aquinas also talks about ethics in terms of obeying God's law, but he tries to make that consistent with a scale-of-being view of reality. Since God's law defines goodness, and goodness equates to being, choosing God's law amounts to choosing being over non-being, and evil amounts to choosing non-being over being. In terms of Aristotle's form-matter scheme, the human will is a combination choosing the good because it participates in God's being (pure Form), or choosing evil because it participates in non-being – a combination of pure determinism and pure indeterminism. As Van Til points out,⁶⁹ Aquinas says, "But only good can be a cause, because nothing can be a cause unless it is a being, and every being as such, is good."⁷⁰ So how does an evil will have the power to do anything? How does non-being cause such misery in the world if non-being can't cause anything? Aquinas tries to get around that by saying that evil choices are always choices for a good thing that has accidentally bad consequences: "And evil as such cannot be intended, nor in any way willed or desired, since being desired has the nature of good, to which evil as such is contrary. And so we see that no person does any evil except intending something that seems good to the person. . . . The will indeed causes evil by accident when the will is borne to something that is good in some respect but is linked to something that is unqualifiedly evil."⁷¹ The failure to follow God's law is a matter of acting while being *inattentive* to the rule that declares the act to be an absolute evil. God's law is negated not by direct opposition but by nonuse of the rule: "But not attending to the rule first takes on the aspect of evil because the soul proceeds to make a moral choice without considering the rule. Just so, the carpenter errs because he proceeds to cut the piece of wood without using the measuring bar, . . . likewise, the moral fault of the will consists in the fact that the will proceeds to choose without using the rule of reason or God's law."⁷² This inattention to the rule is compared to "silence or darkness, since the deficiency is just a negation."⁷³ As Van Til quotes Jacques Maritain explaining, ". . . the creature slinks, not by an action but a free non-action or disaction,—from the influx of the First Cause,—which influx is loaded with being and goodness—it slinks from it insofar as this influx reaches the free region as such, it renders this influx sterile, it *nihilates* it."⁷⁴ There is no room in Aquinas's explanation of evil as non-

⁶⁹ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 104.

⁷⁰ *Summa Theologica*, [1a.49.1](#).

⁷¹ Aquinas, *De Malo (On Evil)*, 1.3.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 103, quoting Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942), p. 34 (emphasis in original).

being for a person to know the good and directly, intentionally commit evil. Yet that is what the Bible teaches in Romans 1. Evil consists in the fact that, “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21), and “Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (Rom. 1:32).

Aquinas's doctrine on the *donum superadditum* fits into the form-matter scheme. On this view, Adam was righteous before the Fall because of this grace added to Adam's created nature. If goodness is being, then this grace is a rise in the scale of being, and losing this grace in the Fall meant sliding down the scale of being closer to non-being. As Van Til puts it, on the Thomistic view, humans are sinful because of their “slenderness of being.”⁷⁵ The Protestant view, in contrast, is that Adam was righteous just in his created nature before the Fall. There is no need to equate finiteness with sin, so there is no need for the *donum superadditum* to explain Adam's pre-Fall perfection. The difference between the Roman Catholic view and Protestant view of salvation becomes a difference between infused grace in the Roman Catholic view, which is a metaphysical idea, and imputed grace in the Protestant view, which is a forensic, ethical concept rather than a metaphysical one.

Aquinas's views of providence and predestination are often regarded as virtually the same as Calvin's, and Van Til acknowledges that Aquinas teaches that God's providence extends to everything in creation according to the pre-existent plan in the divine mind.⁷⁶ This includes predestination of salvation⁷⁷ and allowing reprobation of the others.⁷⁸ But whereas Calvin based his views of predestination on the clear knowledge from God found in the revelation of the Bible, Aquinas, in addition to appealing to Scripture, tries to explain these doctrines in terms of the Aristotelian form/matter scheme, which gives the whole issue a very different, anti-biblical character. In accordance with Aquinas's appeal to Aristotle's concept of being, God's control of all things arises from the idea that the perfection of God's being is identical to the perfection of derivative being. God wills the fullness of His being in creation: “Furthermore, in willing Himself God wills all that is in Him. But all things in a certain manner pre-exist in Him through their proper models, as was shown above. God, therefore, in willing Himself likewise wills other things.”⁷⁹ Arthur Lovejoy calls this the principle of plenitude.⁸⁰ On this principle, God should will all that is within God, which is infinite, in His creation at all times. Aquinas

⁷⁵ Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 244.

⁷⁶ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* p. 99, citing *Summa Theologica* [1.22.1](#).

⁷⁷ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* p. 100, citing *Summa Theologica* [1.23.2](#).

⁷⁸ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* p. 101, citing *Summa Theologica* [1.23.3](#).

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [1.75.5](#).

⁸⁰ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 76.

must find a way to avoid this absurd consequence and to affirm the voluntary nature of God's will so that God can choose not to will some things, even though they are good things. The only way that Aquinas can avoid this is by being inconsistent and by appealing to non-being to negate being. He is inconsistent by later talking about God's perfection being reflected in creation by creating a mere "many" things rather than "all" things or an infinite number of things.⁸¹ The complete determinism of being is countered by non-being: "Hence, although the being of any given thing is as such a good and its non-being an evil, the non-being of something can fall under the will (though not by necessity) because of some adjoined good that is preserved."⁸² The sum of this means that God's will has a rational aspect that follows God's intellect, but God's will also has an irrational aspect that finds its freedom in non-being. As Van Til puts it, "The will of God is, on the one hand, said to be identical with the intellect of God. This is on Thomas' principles sheer monism. But then again the will of God is set over against the intellect of God and is made purely irrational."⁸³ Providence in creation, then, is limited. As Van Til observes, Aquinas relates providence to types in God.⁸⁴ Van Til references an article in *Summa Theologica* in which Aquinas says, "it is necessary that the type of the order of things towards their end should pre-exist in the divine mind: and the type of things ordered towards an end is, properly speaking, providence."⁸⁵ Necessity applies to types, but contingency applies to the matter that joins with the form. So then, Van Til argues, put in the context of Aristotle's philosophy in which there can be no Creator/creation distinction, comprehensive predestination would amount to complete determinism because everything would fully participate in the being of Form; but that would destroy matter, which arises from non-being. Since there is both Form and matter, Form cannot fully extend to every detail of the world. Consequently, on Aquinas's view of providence and predestination, evil is a necessary part of the world; and this is not just because God accomplishes a greater good by allowing evil, but because matter and non-being are necessarily both components of the world. Remember, Aquinas equates being with moral goodness; therefore gradations in being means gradations in goodness. He says that "the perfection of the universe requires that there should be inequality in things, so that every grade of goodness may be realized."⁸⁶ Contrary to the Calvinist view, Aquinas holds that it would be impossible for God to make a world in which some people do not fall into sin. Continuing in the same article, Aquinas says, "so the perfection of the universe requires that there should be some which can fail in

⁸¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [2.45.2-3](#). As Lovejoy points out, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 76.

⁸² Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [1.81.3](#).

⁸³ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 100.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, [1a.22.1](#), cited by Van Til in *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 101.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, [1a.48.2](#).

goodness, and thence it follows that sometimes they do fail. Now it is in this that evil consists, namely, in the fact that a thing fails in goodness.”⁸⁷ In conclusion, Aquinas explains freedom of the will of both God and man in terms of non-being.

I should also note that overturning the Greek view of form and matter in favor of the sovereignty of a personal Creator was necessary for the development of modern science, providing a basis for the detailed, rational study of matter. Thomas Torrence explains that the Christian view sanctified matter to make science a noble pursuit:

Christian belief in the goodness and integrity of the physical universe . . . played an incalculable part in transforming the ancient worldview. It destroyed the Platonic and Aristotelian idea that matter is, if not evil, the raw material of corruption and unreality and the source of disorder in the universe, and it also ruled entirely out of consideration the pessimistic views of nature that emanated from the dualistic sects such as the Manichaeans and the Gnostics, thereby emancipating the material reality of the universe for serious scientific attention.⁸⁸

13. *Van Til’s comments on scholasticism are likewise incorrect. In the first place, he speaks of scholasticism as if it were a monolithic school of thought or doctrine based on Aristotelianism. . . Scholasticism is not a particular doctrine. It was a method designed for schools—thus the name “scholastic.”. . . Van Til’s misunderstanding of scholasticism in the Reformed tradition goes hand in hand with the old Calvin vs. the Calvinists thesis, which has also been thoroughly debunked. (p. 39, 40)*

I’ll admit that I have not yet had the time to read Richard Muller’s multi-volume work, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*. But given what I have read in the same vein, plus my knowledge of Van Til’s writings, I think that I can make some relevant comments.

First, it should be noted that, if Van Til was wrong in some of his views on historical theology, that does not undermine the soundness of his philosophical arguments for the truth of Christianity. If scholasticism cannot be broadly characterized as Aristotelian, that does not undermine Van Til’s arguments against specific arguments by specific people like Aquinas. If there were scholastics who were Van Tillian before there was a Van Til, so much the better. Of course, the Reformed Thomists

⁸⁷ Van Til cites Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee, 1942), p. 6, and Maritain cites this passage in Aquinas.

⁸⁸ Thomas Torrence, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 67.

promoting historical revisionism of scholasticism don't expect to find that. For some reason they think that finding non-Aristotelian scholastics boosts their case for Aquinas's Aristotelianism.

Second, Van Til is still within his rights to make criticism of scholasticism as a broad class of thinkers even if there are exceptions to the views that he attributes to scholasticism. To illustrate, a person can be regarded as accurate in criticizing "modern evangelicalism" on certainly broadly-held points among modern evangelicals even though there are those within that group to which the criticisms do not apply. It should be noted that Van Til acknowledges that both Augustinianism and Aristotelianism were influential in scholasticism, with Aristotelianism gaining the upper hand in the later years.⁸⁹ Therefore, when Van Til characterizes scholasticism as Aristotelian, we can interpret him to be referring mainly to the later years, although he does not always make that distinction clear.

Third, the revisionist studies that Mathison cites that purport to show that scholasticism was not broadly uniform in theological substance are only relevant to Van Til's claims in so far as these studies examine the issues with which Van Til was concerned. Scholastics no doubt had many disagreements among themselves, but did they differ on the points that Van Til faults them for? Even if certain scholastics strongly argued against Aristotle on some issues, did they still assume the form/matter scheme of Greek thought? Even more broadly, did they assume that human reason is generally uncorrupted in regard to earthly matters? These are Van Til's main criticisms of scholasticism. Critics of Van Til are notoriously bad at correctly representing his views, so they are unlikely to address Van Til's concerns in their studies of historical theology.

Fourth, Van Til points out that a sharp distinction between method and substance is naive. Method is shaped by a philosophy of reality.⁹⁰ There is no neutrality. Why would so many men over so long a time hold to the same method of scholarship? Because they shared a similar view of the world. Why did scholasticism come to an end? Because men changed their worldview and developed new methods to suit the new philosophical views. Scholasticism's dialectic method served well the purpose of exploring ways to reconcile various authorities. When men's views of authority changed, particularly in caring less about reconciling ancient authorities with the Bible, it makes sense for their methods of scholarship to change too. To give a modern example of the connection between method and substance, the method of modern science is to exclude the supernatural, and the method of creationism is to include the Bible as authoritative in science. Neither side would view the method of the other side as neutral with respect to a theory of reality.

⁸⁹ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 56.

⁹⁰ Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, p. 241.

14. *Calvin cannot be saying that non-Christians know nothing when he explicitly says that non-Christians know something and that Christians can learn much from non-Christians about earthly things. (pp. 42-43)*

Van Til agrees. Next.

15. *Calvin says that the natural man does truly know the world (earthly things). According to Van Til, Calvin says that that the natural man does not truly know the world. In other words, Van Til presents Calvin as teaching the opposite of what Calvin explicitly says. . . . Making all of this even more confusing is the fact that what Van Til says Calvin really means is also the opposite of what Van Til himself says when he himself grants that natural men do have knowledge of earthly things. (p. 43)*

Fesko makes this same argument against Van Til, and I address it more fully in my [review](#) of his book. Van Til holds that Calvin was not completely consistent, so there are occasional statements that Calvin makes about human knowledge that Van Til does not agree with. Of course, Mathison's argument here concerns the same issue that I address above about whether unbelievers have "true knowledge." Mathison fails to distinguish the three, noncontradictory perspectives that Van Til takes on that question.

A MONSTROUS SYNTHESIS OF IDEALISM AND CHRIST? (p. 44)

16. *Because Van Til sometimes qualifies these statements and grants that unbelievers have true knowledge of the external world, these similarities with post-Kantian thought are not sufficient to demonstrate that Van Til has adopted the systems of either Kantianism or idealism. (p. 48)*

But then:

. . . he seems to have allowed post-Enlightenment philosophy to dictate his apologetic agenda. (p. 49)

Van Til is very clear how he redefines idealistic terminology to fit orthodox theology, and he writes extensively about his disagreements with idealism on core issues, even identifying Kant's philosophy as the most consistent expression of rebellion against God in the history of philosophy up to that point in history:

Paul says that after the fall of Adam man makes God in his image. He represses the truth about himself as the creature made by God. As the responsible heirs of Adam's rebellion, all men, from the earliest times to the present, start with this assumption of human autonomy. Kant did not invent this principle of autonomy or self-sufficient inwardness. He merely expressed it more consistently than did his predecessors.⁹¹

Van Til regards a Kantian synthesis with Christianity as monstrous as an Aristotelian synthesis: "The synthesis of Aristotle and Christ is as monstrous as is the synthesis of Kant and Christ."⁹² Yet Mathison, like other Protestant Thomists in our day, wants to criticize Van Til for adopting anti-Christian Kantian ideas, despite not being able to find the particular evidence to pin the charge on him. Modern Protestant Thomists have all convinced themselves that there is some kind of idealist influence in Van Til's apologetic that has led him to compromise Christianity in some way. Even though Mathison admits that when Van Til uses an idealist term, he is "not using it in a Kantian sense," he still brings up idealist terms as a problem. Mathison goes on for several paragraphs raising innuendoes about Van Til being an idealist. It's a case of gossip being dressed up like a philosophical argument. Van Til's use of some idealist terminology while also extensively denouncing the idealists' rebellion against God is hardly equivalent to Aquinas's slavish devotion to "the Philosopher" while also claiming that Aristotle proved the existence of the true God. You aren't going to find Aquinas describing Aristotle's philosophy as "immediately and directly destructive of Christian theism" as Van Til does of Kantianism:

It is of utmost importance to see the true meaning of Kant's phenomenalism. This phenomenalism, it now appears, is immediately and directly destructive of Christian theism. Phenomenalism of the sort that Kant has given us can be kept alive only by a constant warfare of exclusion of all that Christianity holds dear. . . . [T]here must of necessity be a death-struggle

⁹¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The New Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974), p. 56.

⁹² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 291.

whenever Christianity and Criticism meet. And they meet at every front since the days when the Copernicus of philosophy took his regular walks in Königsberg.⁹³

If Van Til adopted Kant's noumenal-phenomenal distinction, that would be equivalent to Aquinas adopting Aristotle's form-matter distinction. It would be adopting an anti-biblical view of reality and dressing it up in biblical language. But Van Til strongly repudiates Kant's noumenal-phenomenal distinction.

On the other hand, Van Til's appropriation of Kant's type of argument, the transcendental argument, is not all that different from Aristotle's and Aquinas's type of argument. Therefore if using a transcendental argument entails adopting idealist philosophy, then Aristotle and Aquinas have adopted idealist philosophy. A transcendental argument is one that concerns what is necessary for the possibility of intelligible experience, and any well-developed philosophy will have a view of what makes experience intelligible. Aristotle thought that the intelligibility of experience is explained by combining Parmenides's principle of abstract unity with Heraclitus's principle of abstract diversity from matter, while placing form within matter (hylomorphism) rather than in a separate realm like Plato did. Aquinas adopted Aristotle's view while trying to make it consistent with Christianity. So the difference between Van Til and Aquinas is not really that one makes use of transcendental argument and the other doesn't, but which one has a good transcendental argument. The problem with Aquinas's view is that it is a bad transcendental argument in two ways. First, his argument tries to combine two views that are inconsistent with one another – the Greek form/matter distinction and the Christian Creator/creation distinction. Van Til faults Aquinas for attempting a "neutral" argument because he tries to present an anti-Christian view as if it is Christian. Second, Aquinas presents a bad transcendental argument because Aristotle's form/matter view does not account for intelligible experience. It is a futile attempt to combine abstract unity (a blank) with abstract diversity (pure chaos) to form the intelligible world.

PRESUPPOSING REASON (p. 50)

17. *No traditional Christian apologist, whether Aquinas or the Reformed scholastics, affirms the blasphemous idea that the mind of man is ultimate in the sense of being metaphysically ultimate. (p. 50-51)*

⁹³ Van Til, *The New Modernism*, pp. 26, 27.

Van Til's claim is not that Aquinas and others explicitly state that the mind of man is ultimate. His claim is that they hold positions that entail that the mind of man is ultimate even though they are trying to prove the transcendent God of Christianity. Aquinas mistakenly tries to integrate Aristotle's monistic philosophy with Christianity's Creator-creature dualism.

18. *Van Til, of course, does not deny that the unbeliever has the ability to understand the apologist's arguments, and his method assumes the unbeliever's ability to judge between two views (the Christian and the non-Christian) as well as his ability to determine which view explains intelligibility itself. He says as much himself. But when these same kinds of statements are made by traditional apologists, Van Til explains them as examples of autonomous human reason. Van Til acknowledges that in terms of the human intellectual faculty and its processes, reason has to be assumed in every appeal to the unbeliever's mind, but granting this obvious point, as Van Til does, undermines his strong claims regarding the antithesis and thus undermines his entire presuppositional system and his arguments against traditional apologetics. (p. 53)*

No, recognizing that unbelievers can reason does not undermine the strong claims of antithesis. The strong claims of antithesis are in regard to the unbeliever's ultimate principles that deny God. But because unbelievers are made in God's image, live in God's world, and are restrained by God's common grace, they are not as bad as their principles entail. The difference between the traditional apologetics that Van Til criticizes and his own position is the difference between *neutral common ground* and *common ground that is God's ground*. Van Til opposes the idea of theistically neutral common ground. Like many critics of Van Til, Mathison claims that Van Til rejects common ground (p. 58), which is false – he rejects only *neutral* common ground. There is no neutrality in this world in regard to God because all ground is God's ground. God created and rules all things; and nothing in life makes sense if God does not exist. Without God there could be neither knowledge nor ethics. But because unbelievers and believers both live in God's world, they have common ground with each other that believers can use to argue for God's existence. Even though unbelievers will not profess belief in the true God, their knowledge of God is inescapable, and that knowledge must be relied upon to some degree to function in God's world. Van Til argues that common grace, when properly understood, confirms absolute antithesis:

At this point I may interject that when I thus emphasize the absolute antithesis I am not denying or even for a moment forgetting the doctrine of common grace. That doctrine does not militate against but here as elsewhere confirms the doctrine of the absolute antithesis. Common grace does not overlook ultimate differences. Nor does it when correctly understood, in any way tone down those ultimate differences. On the contrary, common grace helps to point out that things which look alike are not ultimately alike. Common grace points specifically to the fact that similarities between the people of God and the people of this world are but proximate similarities and that these proximate similarities play before the background of ultimate differences. If people do not believe in common grace or do not know what it means, they are likely to raise proximate similarities to ultimate similarities or to raise proximate differences to ultimate differences with the result that the absolute differences are toned down.⁹⁴

REJECTION OF REFORMED NATURAL THEOLOGY (p. 53)

19. *If man cannot know anything truly about the created order, then a knowledge of God that begins with an examination of the created order will obviously not be possible. Van Til explicitly ties these two ideas together, saying that since fallen man cannot truly know anything, natural theology is impossible.* (p. 55)

Like Fesko, Mathison confuses Van Til's statements about the unbeliever's reaction to natural revelation, which is to suppress and distort it, with the false claim that Van Til denies natural revelation, which the unbeliever knows inescapably and with enough clarity to make him responsible for failing to acknowledge the true God, thus earning himself a place in Hell. Roman Catholic theology does not sufficiently distinguish between natural revelation with man's reaction to it, so their affirmation of natural revelation is often associated with claims that unbelievers acknowledge the true God. As Van Til puts it, "The Roman Catholic has no such doctrine of common grace. In his system the believer and the unbeliever have an area in common without difference. Romanism assumes that the 'natural theology' of the natural man is a true evaluation of the revelation of God in nature. It thus virtually confuses God's revelation to man with man's response to that revelation."⁹⁵ Because unbelievers suppress and distort natural revelation, their statements about any sort of god that they acknowledge will be a gross

⁹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979), p. 189.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

distortion of the true God's nature. In that sense, natural theology is always natural idolatry in the hands of unbelievers. That's what Paul teaches in Romans 1. Men suppress the clear revelation of God's nature through creation and worship created things instead. Again, this does not mean that unbelievers are wrong about everything they say in every respect. But at least it means that we should not expect to find a pagan, an enemy of God, who provides a rigorous proof of the existence of the true God. Furthermore, Van Til does not merely quote Romans 1 to prove that Aristotle's philosophy did not prove the true God. Van Til examines Aristotle's specific arguments and shows that they don't present us with the true God. The form/matter scheme of Aristotle's thought must be tossed aside in order to construct an argument for the true God.

Yet, the Christian, having his eyes opened by the Holy Spirit and enlightened by God's special revelation in the Bible, is able to construct an argument for God's existence from nature. That is what Van Til's transcendental argument for the existence of God is, an example of natural theology done right.⁹⁶ He argues that the possibility of any and all knowledge, "whether it be the trees of the garden or the angels in heaven," requires the existence of God.⁹⁷ The process of induction that scientists rely on, that there is uniformity to natural law, requires the existence of God.⁹⁸ Such arguments from nature to prove God's existence can be presented to pagans and be used by the Holy Spirit to open their eyes so that they have saving faith in the true God.

Because of Aquinas's Aristotelian empiricism, that all knowledge begins with sensation, he says concerning proof for the existence of God that the "effect is better known to us than its cause."⁹⁹ In other words, the facts of our immediate, earthly environment are known better to us than God is known. Through nature, we know God "in a general and confused way. . . . This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching."¹⁰⁰ Here Aquinas is stating the *probabilistic* character of our knowledge of God through nature. There is some kind of First Cause, but what that cause is like is indeterminate. Yet there is also a sense in which the First Cause of natural revelation *necessarily* exists: "if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist."¹⁰¹ (Mathison objects to Van Til saying that Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God demonstrate His probable existence rather than

⁹⁶ See section 3, "TAG as Natural Revelation," in my essay, "The Scope and Limits of Van Til's Transcendental Argument: A Response to John Frame," http://www.christianciv.com/The_Scope_and_Limits_of_VTAG.pdf.

⁹⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 102.

⁹⁸ Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 308; *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 283-84.

⁹⁹ *Summa Theologica*, [1.2.2.](#)

¹⁰⁰ *Summa Theologica*, [1.2.1.](#)

¹⁰¹ *Summa Theologica*, [1.2.2.](#)

His necessary existence [p. 56, n. 22]. But Aquinas claimed both, in different respects.) But if we examine Aquinas's views further, "probabilistic" is even too positive a word to describe our knowledge of God through nature. While Peter has a silhouette that makes him distinguishable from, say, a bird, Aquinas removes all distinctions from God's nature. Aquinas says that anything positive in our experience of the world must be stripped away in our thinking in order for us to know God through nature, leaving God to be a "supremely simple form;"¹⁰² therefore, there is no content to our concept of God that is derived from nature. Contrary to Aquinas's goals and hopes as a Christian, such an empty concept could not have caused anything in the material world, even to give a faint glimmer of knowledge about it. Aquinas's cause that must exist, but whose nature is fuzzy, ends up as having a nature devoid of content that *could not* have caused anything in the material world. Aquinas's attempt at proving the existence of God ends up disproving Him. God as an empty concept *necessarily does not exist*, because that would undermine the possibility of rationality, knowledge, and ethics. It definitely is not a method that lives up to the Apostle Paul's statement: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:19-20).

Contrast Aquinas's approach with Van Til's. For Van Til, every fact of experience provides certain knowledge of God as necessarily existing. The very intelligibility of any fact requires the existence of God. God is the source of both matter and form, diversity and unity, so God's mark as Creator is evident in every fact that we encounter. As the source of both the one and the many, He is absolute, the concrete universal. He cannot be a finite being. (The issue of infinite regress does not arise on this view because nothing could be in back of an absolute God. Infinite regress arises as a problem only for finite sources of motion.) Since the knowledge of God is inescapable, the reason that men don't acknowledge His existence is not because they have only a faint, distorted knowledge of Him but because they suppress the clear knowledge that they have. They sin against their better knowledge, therefore God's wrath against them for worshipping the creation rather than the Creator is just.

¹⁰² *Summa Theologica* [1.3.4.](#)

Contrasting Aquinas and Van Til on Natural Revelation and Natural Theology

	Natural Revelation	Natural Theology
Aquinas	Faint indications of God’s existence as the remote cause of the universe.	Through the faint indications of God’s existence, the natural man will acknowledge God’s existence and sometimes develop rigorous arguments to support that belief.
Van Til	Inescapable and certain knowledge of God’s existence for all mankind through creation.	Natural men (unbelievers) will suppress the inescapable knowledge of God and worship idols, which will be reflected in their philosophical arguments. While not acknowledging the true God, indications of their knowledge of God will be expressed in various degrees in their behavior and thinking.

20. *Thus Paul, according to Calvin, draws proof from a common ground, from the created world on which we both stand. He used natural theology. (p. 58)*

Mathison is contrasting Paul’s speech in Athens in Acts 17 with Van Til’s alleged view that rejects common ground with unbelievers. As already explained, Van Til does not reject common ground, just theistically-neutral common ground. Consequently, Van Til also does not reject natural theology rightly understood.

As for Paul’s appeal to the words of pagan philosophers in Acts 17:28, surely Mathison is aware that Paul quotes authors who made these statements in the promotion of pantheism. Their god is an impersonal one that is not distinct from the world.¹⁰³ Yet Paul is quoting them in a speech that promotes the existence of a transcendent, personal Creator. Therefore, Paul has to be using their words in a way that takes them out of their original context and puts them in a different context that supports a different kind of god than theirs. Likewise with Paul’s appeal to the inscription to “the unknown god” in Acts 17:23. The Athenians did not intend for this inscription to be an appeal to the true God in contrast to all the others gods, but an appeal to a finite god that the Athenians might have missed in their homage to many other finite gods in their pantheon. Paul used the phrase “the unknown god” to

¹⁰³ Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, p. 4.

refer to a different god than the Athenians intended. This is a perfectly acceptable use of pagan ideas in Van Til's view. If Paul had argued that the Greek pantheists and polytheists were *intending* to describe the true God, the transcendent Creator, then there would be a problem with the truth of Paul's claim.¹⁰⁴ And it is this kind of claim that Aquinas makes when he says that Aristotle proved the true God: "But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of the natural reason."¹⁰⁵ Pagans know that there is one God because of God's witness through nature, but they suppress that truth, so we are not going to find pagan philosophers offering rigorous arguments that demonstrate the existence of the true God.

Consider how the pagan quotes in Paul's speech both are and are not examples of common grace. As they were intended to be understood, the quotes are expressions of rebellion against God, worship of false gods, idols. The quotes are examples of common grace to the extent that elements of the statements can be extracted from their original, broader context, i.e. worldview, and placed in an alien worldview. Polytheism can be said to reflect the suppressed knowledge that pagans have that the true God is personal, and pantheism can be said to reflect the suppressed knowledge that pagans have that the true God is universal. Nevertheless, Paul's point in quoting the pagan statements is not to commend their *knowledge* received through common grace but to highlight their *ignorance* of God (Acts 17:30), like blind men groping in darkness even though evidence for God was everywhere around them (Acts 17:27). He quotes the statements of pagans for the rhetorical purpose of getting the attention of the Athenians, trying to get them to forsake their familiar way of looking at the world by using their words to describe a much different view of reality. He was hoping to spur a thought like, "We've had this idea of an 'unknown god' completely wrong. Rather than build an altar to an unknown finite god, we should destroy the whole pantheon and worship the sovereign Creator whom Paul is telling us about, whom we have refused to acknowledge even though He is near to each one of us. The true God is near to us, but that is because He is the sovereign Creator, not because He is an impersonal principle indistinct from nature as our pantheists have claimed."

Also, as Van Til points out, in interpreting Paul's speech to the Athenians, we should consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, that Paul specifically refers to the Greeks (v. 22) when he says that God has "made foolish the wisdom of this world" (v. 20) and that "the world did not know God through

¹⁰⁴ See Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens," <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa045.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, [1:3:2](#).

wisdom" (v. 21).¹⁰⁶ Greek polytheism did not allow for a transcendent God, and Greek philosophy could not have allowed an incarnation into a living human being its abstract Form that Aristotle called the Unmoved Mover.

21. If man can know many things about the created world, as Van Til asserts in a number of places, then traditional natural theology and traditional methods of apologetics are also possible. (p. 56)

In Mathison's discussion on natural theology, he accuses Van Til of conflating natural revelation and natural theology. He doesn't provide a specific citation for this claim. (He cites Van Til's entire essay "Nature and Scripture" in Note 211, but he provides no quotes or even page numbers.) But this sentence is an example of Mathison doing exactly what he accuses Van Til of doing. The fact that unbelievers are given true knowledge by God and that, on a proximate level, they know many things about the world, does *not* mean that we should expect to find a pagan who develops a sound proof for the existence of God as Aquinas thinks that Aristotle did. Aristotle, like all non-Christians, was a God-hating idolater who suppressed the truth about God according to Paul in Romans 1. According to Paul in 1 Corinthians, the Greeks "did not know God through wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:21). We can make use of some ideas from Aristotle here and there, but we must reject any claim that he proclaimed the true God in his philosophy. And Van Til explains exactly how Aristotle's philosophy excludes the true God: by holding to the form/matter scheme of reality. Van Til's analysis justifies Tertullian charge: "philosophers, those patriarchs of heretics, as they may be fairly called."¹⁰⁷

Conclusion: Mathison provides a fairly accurate summary of Van Til's approach to apologetics at the beginning of his paper, but when he comes to examine some of those themes, he has serious misunderstandings and leaves out the heart of Van Til's critique of non-Christian thought, which is in terms of the issue of the One and the Many. Particularly with regard to Aquinas, Mathison shows that he has no recognition of Van Til's central argument against Aquinas, which is adopting Aristotle's form-matter scheme. His main evidence for Van Til's compromise with post-Kantian idealism is that, at least some times, Van Til says that unbelievers don't have knowledge of the external world (p. 48). Mathison is mistaken about Van Til's view on that.

¹⁰⁶ Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁷ Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, Ch. 3.

Mathison holds to many of the standard distortions of Van Til held by other Protestant Thomists. He strongly holds to the Thomistic/Aristotelian view of God, and he knows Van Til well enough to know that Van Til rejects, in some significant sense, the Thomism that he holds dearly. That Van Til rejects Thomism is enough for Mathison to reject Van Til without putting significant effort into understanding Van Til. Thomists have a view of the strength of a long tradition of Greek influence on Christian theology that makes it inconceivable for them to separate the two and anathematize the first. Van Til recognizes that there is a long history of appeals to Greek philosophy by Christian theologians, but he argues that this tradition must be rejected when it conflicts with Scripture,¹⁰⁸ and not just on a point here or there but undermining the whole structure of Christianity – God, creation, sin, salvation, incarnation, revelation, etc. – if followed consistently.¹⁰⁹ And at least some of the supposed strength of the continuity of “classical theism” is oversold based on a failure to recognize ambiguity and equivocation – a particular “classical” term like “simplicity” is often understood in many different ways by different authors.¹¹⁰

Beyond the debate on historical theology, if Thomists are going to make a compelling case against Van Til, then there will have to be Thomists who understand Van Til’s central arguments against Aquinas and Aristotle and who then compare his arguments to a close reading of Aquinas’s and Aristotle’s writings. Such a critique by a Thomist has yet to be written. Until such a critique has been written, Thomists can fiddle on the roof and shout “Tradition!” all they want; but they are not going to convince anyone who values sound scholarship and the sufficiency of Scripture.

¹⁰⁸ Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 72-155.

¹⁰⁹ Warren, “The Scope and Limits of Van Til’s Transcendental Argument: A Response to John Frame,” http://www.christianciv.com/The_Scope_and_Limits_of_VTAG.pdf.

¹¹⁰ For example, Russell L. Friedman observes that “simplicity can be something of an elastic concept, admitting of degrees,” in his book *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 100. For the Patristic Fathers, see *Christopher Stead, Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (OUP Oxford, 2009); and Gavin Ortlund, “Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing a Contemporary Discussion,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Oct. 2014).