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4.2 Biblical Counseling Symposium



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ANTITHESIS AND INTEGRITY IN COUNSELING: A VAN TILIAN CRITIQUE OF SUPPLEMENTATION IN THE DISCIPLINE

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1. Introduction

The field of biblical counseling again stands at a crossroads. From its earliest days it has faced internal debates and recurring struggles—hardly surprising for a discipline born of reformation.

In its modern expression, the reformation that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s sought to restore the church's historic care of souls. For all his polemics, Dr. Jay Adams was a necessary voice—a prophet crying in the wilderness—calling the church to reclaim territory it had ceded despite two millennia of pastoral shepherding and soul care.

That reclamation immediately raised intramural questions: if pastoral care is not to be outsourced to the secular priesthoods of the age, to what extent—if at all—may psychological or philosophical "advancements" be incorporated into the ordinary means of grace for the care of persons?

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As with every true reformation, the work did not end once begun. Reformation provokes counter-reformation, and the call remains *semper reformanda*—in all areas of life and ministry.

2. A New Reformation in the 21st Century

In twenty-first-century American biblical counseling, we are told we are witnessing a new "reformation"—one that claims to recover a consistently Reformed posture toward incorporating external materials and scientific advancements into ministerial care and into the means by which sanctification proceeds.[2] This is allegedly what the field should have embraced from the start.

Alongside this central notion are two additional claims. First, Jay Adams fused a Reformed epistemology with a kind of hyper-fundamentalism,[3] thereby closing off legitimate reappropriation of insights from unbelieving practitioners in counseling, psychology, or psychiatry. Second, "everyone integrates";[4] the only question, we are told, is what kind of integration one practices.

But if "integration" is to mean anything at all—and if Cornelius Van Til's metaphysic and ethical antithesis hold—then some clarifications are in order. Unbelieving thought invariably borrows capital from the Christian worldview simply to live, move, and have its being. The fact that believers and unbelievers inhabit the same created order does not entail importing unbelieving thought and practice into pastoral ministry; it simply acknowledges that unbelievers operate within God's world.

2. Nathaniel D. Brooks, "Herman Bavinck, Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors: How an Old Dutch Theologian Helps Us Make Sense of Biblical Sufficiency," *Convocation Address*, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, August 2022, https://rts.edu/resources/herman-bavinck-patron-saint-of-biblical-counselors/, and see also Jared S. Poulton, "Reforming Counseling: The Adaptation of Van Tilian Concepts by Jay Adams" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024). It is worth noting the present author considers Dr. Brooks and Dr. Poulton personal friends and is thankful for their ministries, despite disagreeing with some of Drs. Brooks's and Poulton's positions and claims in the discipline.

3. Jared Poulton, "Reforming Counseling: The Adaptation of Van Tilian Concepts by Jay Adams" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 343–44. Poulton's specific word choice is "Neo-Kuyperian Fundamentalism."

4. Nathaniel D. Brooks, "Everybody Integrates: Biblical Counseling and the Use of Extrabiblical Material," *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 7–19. The nature of this argument—that "everyone in the discipline engages in integration"—has been part of classic integrationist argumentation. See James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Kregel, 2005), 12–13. This line of reasoning reflects not only a historic integrationist approach but also a redefinition of "integration" itself, such that even those within the biblical counseling tradition are portrayed as integrationists. Beck and Demarest illustrate this strategy by citing David Peterson's three models of integration—reduction, challenge, and lens—before commending their own fourth model, "engagement," which seeks to incorporate data from both theology and psychology in the task of understanding the human person. The effect of such reframing is that the very term "integration" loses its distinctive meaning, since, if all counselors are said to integrate, the historic critique and distinction of integrationism is rendered meaningless.

On a Van Tilian account, the direction of supplementation matters. It is not the Christian system that stands in need of supplementation from unbelief; rather, the unbelieving system requires supplementation to achieve coherence and to make sense of the world it inhabits. By this, the claim of the essay is not that unbelievers can discover nothing true, make no meaningful observations, or contribute nothing of penultimate usefulness in the created order. Rather, it argues that in the ministerial care of souls, unbelieving systems cannot furnish norming frameworks, governing anthropologies, or importable methods without bringing with them presuppositional distortions of unbelief.

We therefore stand at a historical precipice and must ask: What has the field believed? What does it now confess? And what sort of "reformation" are we presently facing?

But first, we must define our terms.

3. The Antithesis

We are speaking of Cornelius Van Til and his thought. Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) was the longtime professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary and is often described as the father of presuppositional apologetics, insisting on the absolute antithesis between belief and unbelief and the necessity of beginning all thought with the triune God.

For Cornelius Van Til, the antithesis refers to the absolute, ethical, and epistemological opposition between the regenerate and the unregenerate mind, grounded in their covenantal relationship to the triune God. There is no "neutral" standpoint of interpretation. Every human thought stands either in principial submission to God's revelation or in principial rebellion against it.[5]

3.1 Ethical Root

The antithesis is not a matter of differing opinions but of covenantal stance: humanity is either in Christ by grace or in Adam suppressing the truth. As Paul writes, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18). At its root, the antithesis is ethical, a heart posture toward God.

5. See Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2nd ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (P&R, 2015), 67; and Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 313.

3.2 Epistemological Outworking

Because God is the Creator and Lord of all, "there is no brute fact."[6] Every fact is already God-interpreted. Thus, the real issue in reasoning is the reference point: "God alone is self-explanatory . . . and must be the final reference point in all human predication."[7] Take any fact, and that fact is already set within a universe where God is the creator and sustainer of that fact. To interpret that fact, without reference to God, is to fundamentally misunderstand that fact. It is to perceive and interpret it amiss. Even something as simple as "the sky is blue" does not take place in a random universe of chance. But God has created the earth, the atmosphere, light, and the scattering of that light through our atmosphere, giving the appearance of blue. All of those truths exist only because the prior, all-interpreting fact—the triune God exists—is true.[8]

3.3 No Neutrality

Van Til pressed the point that all of life is religious. There is no shared "neutral" territory.

"There is no area of neutrality between the believer and the unbelievers . . . Christians cannot allow the legitimacy of the assumptions that underlie the non-Christian *methodology*."[9]

The point is clear: God himself is the only ultimate reference point—the precondition for all knowing. Every statement we make about reality, every fact, every law, ultimately traces back to God's eternal nature and decree. The issue is always whether we build our knowledge on the rock of divine revelation or on the sand of autonomous human reason.

Van Til encapsulates his epistemology thus:

> Suppose then the existence of God. Then it would be a fact that every fact would be known truly only with reference to him. If then one did not place a fact into relation with God, he would be in error about the fact under investigation. Or suppose that one would just begin his investigations as a scientist, without even asking whether or not it is necessary to make reference to such a God in his investigations, such a one would be in constant and in fundamental ignorance all the while. And this ignorance would be

6. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (P&R, 2003), 192–3.
7. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (P&R, 2023), 2.
8. Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*, updated ed. (Great Commission Publications, 1976), 3 (PDF pagination), where Van Til famously said "unless God is back of everything, you cannot find meaning in anything."
9. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 10.

culpable ignorance, since it is God who gives him life and all good things.[10]

4. Van Til on Commonalities

Now, to be clear, Van Til was not blind to commonalities. He acknowledged that believer and unbeliever share:

1. **Vocabulary and Communication** – We must speak across worldviews. This is the "common ground" of shared words.[11] But the meaning of those words is never neutral.[12]
2. **Observations Consistent with Christianity** – At times the unbeliever will make statements that happen, by borrowed capital, to coincide with Christian truth. But these do not stand on their own terms; they require supplementation by special revelation to be rightly understood, as will be discussed in the following section.[13]

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this latter point is Van Til's reflection on psychology's notion of the subconscious. He acknowledged that the concept has elements of truth in it.[14] Yet he was careful to insist this is not an invitation to import unbelieving psychology into the Christian system. Rather, it serves as a provocation to return to Scripture, where the reality of the subconscious is already addressed. David himself prays, *"Declare me innocent from hidden faults"* (Ps 19:12), asking God to forgive sins which were beyond his conscious awareness.[15] In this way, even the unbeliever's observations drive us back to God's Word. And this, from the inception of the biblical counseling movement, has been a hallmark: allowing such provocations from secular psychology to send us deeper into the Scriptures, not outside them.

10. Cornelius Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Den Dulk Foundation, 1969), 4.
11. Cornelius Van Til, *Psychology of Religion* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 60.
12. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 195–6.
13. Van Til allows that Christians may observe and learn from the pedagogical methods of unbelievers in terms of form, while rejecting their frameworks. Van Til acknowledges that Christians may learn from unbelievers "any improvement in the technique of dealing with men that anyone offers us," yet he goes on to significantly temper such a notion by warning that "what would be considered the best psychological approach to a person from the non-Christian point of view may be the worst from a Christian point of view." He concludes, "It is much nearer the truth then to say that we can learn from the modern school of the psychology of religion what not to do, than to say that we can learn from them what to do." Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 2–3.
14. Frame commenting on Van Til, in *Cornelius Van Til, An Analysis of His Thought*, 250.
15. Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 71–72.

While some may use the biblical imagery of "plundering the Egyptians," yet for Van Til, any plundering was never about bringing foreign treasures into the Christian system, as though they could enrich us. It was about using the enemy's own spoils to expose the bankruptcy of his system and to build up the edifice of the kingdom of Christ.[16]

This is why Proverbs can rightly say both: "*Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes*" (Prov 26:5), and "*Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself*" (Prov 26:4).[17]

This, then, is Van Til's approach to commonality: engage, but in a way that demonstrates the antithesis, exposes the folly, and presses the unbeliever, or the unbelieving system in our present case, back to the truth of God.

To be clear, Van Til's doctrine of common grace allows that unbelievers may discover much that is true and useful.[18] But this is not the same as granting that unbelieving disciplines may supply the church with governing categories or methods for ministerial care—frameworks and methods which are never philosophically neutral.

5. Supplementation

Alongside the antithesis, Van Til employed the category of supplementation—not as a bridge to integrating unbelieving thought into the Christian system, but as a way of describing how God's own acts of revelation and grace cohere. General and special revelation presuppose and supplement one another in an "organic" fashion. Adam, from the beginning, required both God's speech and God's creation to interpret his calling rightly. After the fall, special revelation took on a redemptive focus, yet it never ceased to serve as the necessary interpreter of the created order. Creation and covenant, too, are supplementary realities, inseparably bound together in God's design.

Van Til summarized this with characteristic bluntness: "Christianity claims to furnish the presuppositions without which a true scientific procedure is unintelligible."[19]

16. Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 1. Van Til says, "Just as in the First World War the Allies could learn much from the Germans and the Germans could learn much from the Allies, so we are quite ready to sit as learners when we read the pages that our opponents have written. But just as the Germans in that war used that which they had learned from the Allies for the purpose of destroying their enemy, and the Allies used that which they learned from the Germans for the destruction of the Germans, so we will also have to use what we learn from the enemy for the destruction of the enemy."
17. Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 205–6.
18. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 22, 43–44, 294.
19. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 57.

5.1 The Directionality of Supplementation

Here lies the crucial difference between supplementation and integration. Supplementation refers to relations within God's own system—creation and covenant, general and special revelation—so no aid from outside is needed. Integration, by contrast, imports insights from unbelief into the Christian framework—something Van Til categorically rejected.

As John Frame explains,

> As for supplementation, Van Til teaches, …all men know the true God through natural revelation, to which special revelation adds supplementary content. In that sense, the model of supplementing general theism accords perfectly with Van Til's own view. His point, of course, is that the unbeliever suppresses the truth and exchanges it for his own lies; accordingly, Greek theism is anti-Christian, not a foundation for a Christian supplement. But we have seen that Van Til also qualifies his view of suppression. He does not claim that every statement of the unbeliever is simply wrong. Is it not possible that Plato or some other philosopher might have uttered statements in accord with Scripture, which an enterprising apologist might employ as a basis for establishing further Christian truth? If so, in such a case the Christian would indeed be supplementing the non-Christian's ideas.[20]

Whatever scattered truths unbelievers may utter are true only as borrowed capital, and they can cohere only when subsumed under God's revelation. In Van Til's words: "The whole fabric of human knowledge would dash to pieces" if not upheld by God's revelation.[21]

The point is decisive: the Christian system requires no supplementation from unbelieving systems; rather, unbelieving systems must be supplemented by God's truth if they are to make sense of reality at all.

5.2 Contemporary Revisions in Biblical Counseling

Within biblical counseling today, a movement has arisen that operates with new labels: *trauma-informed biblical counseling*, *clinically informed biblical counseling*, and other related terms. Critics have referred to these voices as "neo-integrationists"—a label Clinically Informed Biblical Counselors would almost certainly reject as disparaging. Nevertheless, the new terminology in the field signals a shift: Clinically Informed

20. John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P&R, 1995), 248.

21. Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), 273.

Biblical Counselors claim that a Reformed understanding of common grace allows the incorporation of external materials and methods into counseling practice.[22]

One recent statement makes the point directly:

> CIBC affirms alongside nouthetic counselors that common grace allows for extrabiblical knowledge to be of significant value in counseling. However, we disagree that all methods emerging from secular psychotherapy are by necessity tainted by their worldview.[23]

This is not a minor adjustment but a clear departure from Van Til's articulation of the antithesis. For Van Til, even "mere observation" is not neutral but already shaped by presuppositions. To claim otherwise is to redefine knowledge at its foundation.

He warned:

> The believer and the non-believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation. The "factness" of the first fact they meet is in question…It is sometimes suggested that though there is a basic difference between the Christian and the non-Christian explanation, there is no such difference in the mere description of facts. With this we cannot agree. Modern scientific description is not the innocent thing that we as Christians all too easily think it is.[24]

For Van Til, "description itself is explanation." To describe is already to define and interpret. Thus, "scientific description is not merely explanation, but it is definitely anti-Christian explanation." And, "the scientist, pretending to be merely a describer of facts, is in reality a maker of facts. He makes facts *as* he describes. His description is itself the manufacturing of facts."[25]

At this point, it is important to distinguish four related matters: observation, description, interpretation, and method. Christians and non-Christians observe many of the same phenomena in human life. Yet, as we have seen, even description is never epistemically neutral, because to name a phenomenon is to already locate it within an anthropology, claims about

22. Brooks and Poulton are cited, not as exhaustive representatives of contemporary revisions within biblical counseling, but as particularly clear and influential case studies of a broader movement of including extrabiblical frameworks and methods under the language of common grace or retrieval.

23. Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristin Kellen, and Sam Williams, "What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?" (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 2024), PDF, https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf

24. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 6.

25. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 7–8.

morality, and a means of change. When such descriptions are formed into methods of care, they inevitably embody those anthropological and moral assumptions. For that reason, the question for counseling is not whether non-Christians notice real aspects of human experience, but whether their ways of construing and treating those features may be imported into pastoral ministry without distortion.

If this is true, then the language of "clinically informed biblical counseling" betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of Van Til. To suggest that secular psychotherapeutic methods can be imported without presuppositional taint ignores the antithesis at its core. All of this is not to say that Van Til ought to be treated as the deciding authority in every counseling debate. It is to indicate, though, that where questions of epistemology, anthropology, and nonneutrality are at stake, his categories press with particular force upon the claims of clinically informed models.

5.3 Appeals to Kuyper and Bavinck

Proponents of these models often appeal to the great Dutch Reformed theologians, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. Some will cite Bavinck's teaching on common grace as though it justifies bringing secular insights directly into counseling—without reckoning with the fact that Van Til himself critiqued Bavinck's inconsistency on that very point.[26] Others contrast Jay Adams with Kuyper, as if Adams simply misstepped in his appropriation of Kuyper, when in fact Adams was consciously drawing from Van Til's position which stands in distinction from Kuyper.[27] And still others go further, suggesting that those who appeal to Van Til today are reading him through fundamentalist eyes.

As one critic argues,

> Adams replaces *a priori* presuppositions with theological beliefs and personal assertions, failing to articulate the "If knowledge, then God" logic of presuppositions. The logic of Adams's theological analysis also provides little room for the recognition of any knowledge among non-Christians. Furthermore, Adams's application of presuppositional analysis goes beyond Van Til's assessment of psychology. Adams rejects the methods and insights of secular psychology and psychiatry because of their foundational

26. See Nathaniel D. Brooks, "Herman Bavinck, Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors: How an Old Dutch Theologian Helps Us Make Sense of Biblical Sufficiency," *Reformed Theological Seminary*, last modified n.d., https://rts.edu/resources/herman-bavinck-patron-saint-of-biblical-counselors/ where Brooks draws on Bavinck's view of common grace to argue for a more positive reception of extrabiblical insights in counseling.

27. Poulton maintains that the real contrast lies between Jay Adams and Abraham Kuyper, rather than between Kuyper and Van Til. See Poulton, "Reforming Counseling," 339–44.

> principles. Van Til remains open to the insights of secular psychology. As a Kuyperian apologist, Van Til calls theologians, Christian psychologists, and ministers of the gospel to construct their own Christian psychology according to their Christian theological principles.[28]

This critique suggests that Adams—and his heirs—collapsed Van Til's nuanced philosophy and approach into a wooden biblicism, rejecting anything not explicitly warranted by Scripture.

While there is of course some truth to each of the above avenues of thought, such appeals risk obscuring Van Til's own careful distinctions. For Van Til himself addressed the differences between his position and that of Kuyper and Bavinck. He honored them deeply but also noted their epistemological inconsistencies—particularly in allowing too much space for "neutral" ground or shared science.

5.4 Van Til's Break with Kuyper and Bavinck

We must now turn to Van Til's respectful but decisive break with Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. Van Til learned deeply from these neo-Calvinist giants, praising them for teaching him to think concretely and to build on one's own presuppositions. Yet it was precisely at the point of *common grace* that he judged them inconsistent in their Reformed epistemology,[29] especially in their openness to insights and observations from unbelieving thought.

He could say of Kuyper:

> It is well to emphasize again that it is from Kuyper, more than from any one else in modern times, that we have learned to think concretely. Both on the question of the universal and on that of the particular, Kuyper has taught us that we must build on our own presuppositions. Yet it must be said that Kuyper has not always been able to live up to this high ideal.[30]

And of Bavinck:

> I began my section on Bavinck by praising him for having shown, better than any one before him, the necessity of building up one's

28. Poulton, "Reforming Counseling," 274–75.

29. By "Reformed epistemology" the present usage is simply reflecting Van Til's conception: "The Christian life and world view . . . presents itself as an absolutely comprehensive interpretation of human experience. The Christian life and world view . . . presents itself as the only true interpretation of human experience." Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 83.

30. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 46.

> theology from one basic principle, namely, Scripture; adding that "Bavinck has not always lived up to this conception."[31]

Van Til summarized their shared methodological weakness:

> These men have certainly led the way in modern times in the direction of working out a truly Protestant theology. But they have not quite had the courage to go consistently along the path they have marked out for us. There are elements of abstract reasoning in their procedure that lead to a natural theology which is not consistently set over against the natural theology of Rome at every point.[32]

5.5 Neutrality and Scholasticism

For Van Til, the root of the problem was that Kuyper's system occasionally granted too much room for neutrality. At times Kuyper allowed questions to be framed using borrowed philosophical categories—what Van Til called "a modernized Platonism."[33] Similarly, while Bavinck rightly emphasized Scripture as the *principium externum* and the inward illumination of the Spirit as the *principium internum*, he sometimes leaned toward a scholastic synthesis of empiricism and rationalism.[34] Van Til insisted that such notions collapse into distortion: Formal statements like "God exists" are meaningless if they are not explicitly Trinitarian.[35] And sinful humanity inevitably twists even the most basic truths about God, falsifying them in unrighteousness.[36]

31. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 177.
32. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 72.
33. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 49.
34. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 58–61.
35. For Van Til's specific examples of these epistemological inconsistencies, see his critique of Kuyper's "modernized Platonism" and his rejection of Kuyper's claim that there is a "common territory" between believers and unbelievers in matters of "weighing and measuring" or in the use of "only one logic." Van Til counters that there are no such neutral zones, arguing that "weighing and measuring and formal reasoning are but aspects of one unified act of interpretation" driven by either autonomous or God-created presuppositions. Regarding Bavinck, Van Til identifies his "moderate realism" as an unbiblical attempt to synthesize "the good of empiricism" and "the good of rationalism," while leaving the "bad" of both. He further critiques Bavinck's reliance on Roman Catholic natural theology and *koinai ennoiai* (common notions), arguing that formal abstractions—such as the bare assertion of "the existence of a God"—are "utterly meaningless" when separated from God's specific triune nature. Because of the natural man's inherent "hatred of God," Van Til concludes that sinful humanity will invariably "falsify," or suppress in unrighteousness, these supposedly neutral general principles. See Van Til's full critique of both Kuyper and Bavinck's thought in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 44–72.
36. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 222.

Thus, Kuyper's occasional "neutrality" and Bavinck's occasional philosophical blending both smuggled in elements from Kant or from Rome.[37]

5.6 The Alternative: Calvin and Consistency

Against both tendencies, Van Til argued that only a consistently Calvinian epistemology could hold. Unlike later scholasticism, Calvin never posited a natural theology independent of Scripture. He did not allow man's reason to function autonomously, nor did he grant an area of neutrality shared by believer and unbeliever. For Calvin—and for Van Til after him—nature can only be interpreted rightly through the lens of Scripture.

Van Til himself made this appeal explicit:

> Summing up what has been said in this section, we would stress the fact that we tend so easily in our common grace discussion, as in all our theological effort, to fall back into scholastic ways of thinking. If we can learn more and more to outgrow scholasticism in our notions about natural theology and natural ethics, we shall be perhaps a bit more careful both in our affirmations and in our negations with respect to common grace.[38]

And again: "If we are to hold to a doctrine of common grace that is true to Scripture, we shall need to build it up after we have cut ourselves clear of Scholasticism."[39]

5.7 Van Til: Not Merely a Neo-Calvinist

Because Van Til learned so much from Kuyper and Bavinck, some

37. For Van Til's direct identification of these foreign elements, see his charge that Kuyper harbored a "semi-Kantian phenomenalism" which caused him to wrongly concede a neutral, "common territory" between believers and unbelievers in matters of weighing, measuring, and formal logic. Because of this allowance for uninterpreted facts, Van Til grouped Kuyper's views on shared knowledge with those of "Catholics, Aristotle and Scholastics." Likewise, Van Til targets Bavinck's philosophical blending, specifically his attempt to adopt a "moderate realism" that synthesizes "the good of empiricism" and "the good of rationalism," as discussed above. Van Til concludes that this synthesis fails to make a "thorough break with Scholasticism" and inadvertently "fits in with Rome's natural theology" by smuggling in non-Christian, abstract principles of reasoning rather than relying strictly on biblical presuppositions. The full critique can be found in: Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 44–72.

38. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 111.

39. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 56. Van Til rejected the traditional theistic proofs, which Bavinck had recast as "testimonies," on the grounds that they remained indebted to a Thomistic method founded on autonomous reason. Such reasoning, in Van Til's view, presupposed what it claimed to prove and inevitably reduced God to a concept acceptable to natural man. He regarded Kant as the culmination of this antitheistic trajectory: by locating the *a priori* categories of knowledge within the human subject, Kant rendered man the measure of all things. Against both, Van Til advanced his transcendental argument—that only the triune God is the necessary precondition for knowledge, logic, and experience.

have labeled him or seen him primarily as a "neo-Calvinist" or "neo-Kuyperian."[40] But on this crucial issue of epistemology, Van Til self-consciously returned to Calvin. He respected Kuyper and Bavinck greatly, of course, but he pressed beyond any inconsistencies he perceived in their system. In his own nomenclature, Van Til was best described not as a Kuyperian, but as a Calvinist in epistemology.[41]

5.8 A Counter-Reformation in Counseling

What we are witnessing in the field of biblical counseling today is not a true Reformation but, as Van Til perhaps would have seen it, a *counter-reformation*. It is presented as if it were the consistent outworking of Reformed theology, but in reality it is of a different order. This modern reformation risks drifting toward epistemological instincts more reminiscent of Trent or Kant than of a consistently Calvinian epistemology. It is presented as a reformation, a move "forward," yet it returns toward an epistemology of autonomous human reason.

5.9 The Problem of Incomplete Retrieval

I am thankful that the field of biblical counseling has grown in its appetite for theology and history. In its past six decades it has often been ahistorical, sometimes pragmatic, and even overly contemporary in its practical theology. Retrieval is good and necessary. But what we are witnessing now is a case of *incomplete* retrieval. Kuyper and Bavinck have been retrieved—for which we ought rejoice—but Van Til has been left behind or misunderstood.

The first generation of biblical counseling, represented by Jay Adams, and the second generation, represented by David Powlison, did not primarily retrieve Kuyper or Bavinck. They drew on Van Til, appropriating his consistent Reformed epistemology[42] and applying it directly to the

40. See Poulton's treatment of Neo-Kuyperian thought in the biblical counseling movement (which is fundamentally a Van Tilian movement), "Reforming Counseling," 146–50, 339–41.

41. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 20, 46–47.

42. See Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), xxi, and David A. Powlison, "Which Presuppositions? Secular Psychology and the Categories of Biblical Thought," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, no. 4 (1984): 270–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/009164718401200402. It should be noted that Poulton frames Van Til chiefly as an apologist and questions whether Adams sufficiently recontextualized Van Tilian concepts for biblical counseling, suggesting that Adams transferred them across disciplines without adequately accounting for their original apologetic function. This, however, misreads Van Til's project, which was not narrowly apologetic but a comprehensive Reformed philosophy of life and knowledge—that is, a consistently Reformed account of reality, human experience, and the conditions of knowing. See Poulton, "Reforming Counseling," 85–88, 150–51, 259–60, 274–75.

care of souls. Their approach was not anti-Kuyperian, but it was decidedly Van Tilian. Adams and Powlison were not mere repeaters of Van Til, of course, but they were Van Tilian far more than they were Kuyperian, in the specific sense relevant here: they treated unbelieving systems not as sources of supplementing method, but as occasions for critique and for renewed return to Scripture.[43]

5.10 Adams, Powlison, and the Van Tilian Legacy

Adams and Powlison both understood what Van Til had made clear: there can be no common ground without distinction. Yes, believer and unbeliever inhabit the same created world. Yes, both must use the same vocabulary, speak of the same phenomena, and engage in the same conversations. But all such engagement is shaped by presuppositions. There are no uninterpreted "brute facts." All data is already interpreted, and when unbelievers interpret the data, they inevitably do so through an anti-Christian lens.

That is why Van Til would never grant, as Kuyper sometimes did, that mere observation was neutral. And it is why he would never adopt, as Bavinck sometimes did, philosophical syntheses that blurred the antithesis. For Van Til, unbelieving investigation and unbelieving interpretation are of one cloth, and they will lead to unbelieving methods and unbelieving interventions.

5.11 Anthropology and Soul Care

The problem becomes acute when we move from general observation to the care of souls. Here we are dealing not with abstractions, but with anthropology—with what it means to be human, to grow in holiness, to live sanctified lives. This is not the stuff of neutrality. This is not the stuff of imprecision.

To import methods from unbelieving systems into the realm of soul care is to import their anthropology. And that anthropology is already mis-framed. Here the stakes are highest, for we are not simply talking about data but about persons created in God's image, fallen in Adam, and redeemed only in Christ.

43. David Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 30.

5.12 Conclusion: A Call to Integrity

The field of biblical counseling now faces a decisive moment. The question is not whether we will continue reforming, but in what direction our reformation will move. Will it be toward consistency with Van Til's Reformed epistemology? Or will it be a counter-reformation, a return to the epistemological inconsistencies of Kuyper and Bavinck, to the frameworks of Kant and Rome?[44]

Van Til was clear: there is no neutrality, no area of shared territory that can be imported without distortion. Any "truth" the unbeliever arrives at is borrowed capital, requiring supplementation by special revelation. The consistent application of this insight shaped the first and second generations of biblical counseling. Adams and Powlison alike appropriated Van Til—not to integrate secular psychologies, but to engage them critically, showing that, at most, they provoke us back to Scripture rather than supply new content for the Christian system.

The call before us, then, is not for novelty but for integrity. Biblical counseling must refuse clinically informed or trauma-informed models that promise sophistication while importing an alien epistemology. What is offered under the banner of reformation risks moving in directions more analogous to Trent or Kant than to a consistently Calvinian account of knowledge.

Our task is to hold fast to Van Til's incisive fidelity and to the legacy of those who consistently appropriated him in the counseling discipline. This is the path of a distinctively Reformed epistemology. This is the way of integrity in the counseling enterprise.

44. Van Til critiques Kuyper and Bavinck for their inconsistent epistemic commitments over the course of 30 pages, going so far as to call their commitment to common ground between believer and unbeliever as retaining elements of Platonic, Kantian, Roman Catholic, and scholastic thought, especially in their accounts of facts, universals, and natural theology. These inconsistencies, he argues, risked introducing brute facts, abstract universals, and neutral epistemic territory into their theology. For the full argument, see Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 44–72.