Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian”: Re-Reading Cornelius Van Til’s Reformed Apologetics in light of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*

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**Introduction**

As a Presbyterian it is a special pleasure to be with you here in the cradle of Presbyterianism in order to reflect upon the relationship between Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) and one of his American Presbyterian proteges—Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). After providing a few introductory remarks on Van Til’s neo-Calvinist heritage, I will summarize his basic attitude toward Bavinck’s theology and provide a snapshot of how the English translations of Bavinck’s works have influenced the perception of Bavinck’s influence upon Van Til in recent scholarship. I will then adduce three lines of evidence which, when taken together, suggest

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that Bavinck’s theological influence upon Van Til is pervasive. Finally, I will conclude with a brief analysis of Van Til’s appropriations of Bavinck’s thought and some reflections on the future of Van Til studies.

Van Til’s Neo-Calvinist Context

I have called Van Til an “American Presbyterian,” but his heritage is more Dutch Reformed than Presbyterian.¹ As a Dutch-American immigrant, Van Til grew up in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), completed his undergraduate studies at Calvin College, and attended Calvin Seminary for a year before matriculating at Princeton. While at Princeton his favorite professor was a fellow Dutch-American immigrant and former Calvin Seminary professor—Geerhardus Vos.² Upon finishing his


academic training, Van Til pastored for a year in the CRC. He turned down four job offers to teach at Calvin College and Seminary, including one offer to succeed his former systematics professor, Louis Berkhof. Therefore, although Van Til’s academic career played out in a predominantly Presbyterian institution (Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia), his primary theological heritage is Dutch Reformed.

It is impossible, however, to reduce Van Til’s theological pedigree to one tradition. He himself admits that a panoply of philosophical and theological tributaries flow into his thought, and


many of these streams remain uncharted waters in Van Til scholarship. Nevertheless, he explicitly identifies Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck as predominant influences. “Wanting to follow the Reformers,” writes Van Til, “it was natural that I read and appreciated the works of those who before me likewise attempted to do so. I first used the works of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.” Additionally, referring to his book, A Christian Theory of Knowledge, Van Til admits that “what has been advocated in this work has in large measure been suggested by Kuyper’s thinking.” Similarly, Van Til comments on his own interpretation of the history of philosophy, see pp. 50–51. Cf. idem, An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 13.


apologetic method, asking, “And have I, following such a method, departed radically from the tradition of Kuyper and Bavinck? On the contrary I have learned all this primarily from them.” In terms of dogmatic influences, therefore, the Dutch neo-Calvinist stream is a prominent—if not the most prominent—tributary flowing into Van Til’s thought.

Van Til’s Preeminent Esteem for Bavinck

Within this neo-Calvinist tributary, Van Til accords Bavinck the place of preeminence. He esteems Bavinck’s Gereformeerde Dogmatiek as “the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times.” His scholarly


10. K. Scott Oliphint, “Forward,” in The Defense of the Faith, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), ix-x, asserts the following: “To understand Van Til’s contribution to Reformed apologetics, one needs to see not simply his criticisms of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Warfield, but, more importantly, the ways in which he was able to take the best of these Reformed theological giants and incorporate their theological insights into his own apologetic methodology.” Idem, “Appendix: Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” in Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 295n45, similarly asserts: “The Dutch influence of Van Til could arguably be the most significant influence that has contributed to his Reformed apologetic.” William Edgar, moreover, in editorial comments throughout Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, observes the following: Kuyper was Van Til’s “mentor” (320n4; cf. 17N7), and Van Til pervasively appropriated Bavinck’s doctrine of God (5, 29n8, 89n1, 319n1, 323n8, 335n33, 341n53, 353nn12, 14, 354n20, 369n1).

interaction with Bavinck’s thought began early on in his academic career and continued throughout;\(^{12}\) accordingly, nearly 1,200 references to Bavinck’s name pervade Van Til’s publications.\(^{13}\) It is no wonder, then, that Van Til admits that he is “greatly indebted to the great Reformed dogmaticians of modern times, such as Charles Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, Shedd, Kuyper and especially Herman Bavinck.”\(^{14}\)


12. Van Til’s second academic publication is his review of Bavinck’s *Paedagogische Beginzelen* and *De Nieuwe Opvoeding* in the *Princeton Theological Review* 27 (Jan 1929): 135–36; cf. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 10; White, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*, 77–78.

13. In terms of raw tabulation (i.e., no differentiation between text and footnotes, etc.) Van Til refers to Bavinck ~1,193 times throughout his collected works, third only to Calvin (~3,413 references) and Kuyper (~1,685 references). His most frequent references to Bavinck occur in the following books: *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 109 references; idem, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 105 references; idem, *The New Synthesis*, 103 references. In light of our thesis regarding Bavinck’s neo-Calvinist influence it is worth noting that Van Til references neo-Calvinist theologians (i.e., Kuyper and Bavinck) much more frequently than he does Presbyterian theologians, such as B. B. Warfield, ~652 references; J. Gresham Machen, ~354 references; the “Princeton Hodges” (i.e., C. W. Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and Charles Hodge), ~312 references; John Murray, ~42 references; and William G. T. Shed, ~40 references. (NB: All tabulations are based on searches performed within the electronic collection of Van Til’s works (Cornelius Van Til, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til (40 Vols.*) (Logos Bible
Bavinck’s Influence in Van Til Scholarship

Despite Van Til’s copious references to Bavinck, the relationship between the two has been largely ignored in Van Til scholarship. This omission is likely due to the language barrier since Bavinck’s *Dogmatiek* was not available in an unabridged English translation until 2008. Prior to the translation, many scholars highlighted Kuyper’s influence upon Van Til, but Bavinck’s influence was largely neglected. A nascent reassessment of

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Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian” Bavinck’s influence, however, can be seen in Van Til scholarship subsequent to the translation. For example, in his 2008 biography of Van Til, John Muether describes Bavinck’s influence as follows:

Although interpreters often portray him as a hybrid of Kuyper and Warfield, Van Til himself generally included Bavinck in his list of interlocutors. Indeed, Bavinck is arguably the greatest of all of these influences, the evidence for which grows as Bavinck’s dogmatics is translated into English. . . . [H]e was less concerned with distinguishing himself from these antecedents than with applying their best insights with a rigorous consistency.  

Muether argues, furthermore, that one reason Van Til received sharp criticism within Presbyterian circles was a lack of familiarity with Bavinck. Most notably, Muether avers that “Van Til did not so


17. Muether, Cornelius Van Til, 56.

18. Muether, Cornelius Van Til, 115, writes, “American Presbyterian disquiet over Van Til’s employment of presuppositional reasoning owed, as previously
much create a new apologetic as he refined Bavinck’s approach, applying it to modernism, old and new.” Similarly, Brian Mattson examines Van Til’s criticisms of Bavinck in a 2008 journal article and concludes as follows:

Van Til’s superficial and at-times uncharitable reading of Bavinck is unfortunate, but not nearly so unfortunate as the impression he gives that Bavinck has more in common with a “traditional” approach to epistemology and apologetics than he has in common with Van Til. If this article establishes anything it is the deep affinity in their theological instincts. Van Til never had an intellectual “friend” like Herman Bavinck.

Several recent Van Til studies, moreover, denote the English translations of Bavinck’s works among their raison d’être. Therefore, with the language barrier removed, Van Til scholars are re-reading the Reformed apologist in light of his predominant dogmatic influence.

**Evidence for Bavinck’s Influence upon Van Til’s Thought**

Having introduced Van Til’s neo-Calvinist heritage, his high esteem for Bavinck, and the reassessment of Bavinck’s influence in the latest Van Til scholarship, I will now present three lines of evidence from Van Til’s own writings which, when viewed as a

noted, to its unfamiliarity with the Reformed tradition, and especially unfamiliarity with Bavinck. Van Til imported many of his ideas from Bavinck, whose four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* was largely inaccessible to the English-speaking world.”

cumulative case, demonstrate the pervasive influence of Bavinck’s dogmatics upon Van Til’s apologetics.

Van Til’s Self-Identity as an Inheritor of Reformed Theology

The first line of evidence is Van Til’s self-identity. Van Til’s followers have frequently hailed him as the “Copernicus” of modern Christian apologetics. He has been lauded accordingly with the following Copernican résumé: he is said (1) to have launched the reformation of apologetics just as Calvin launched the reformation of theology, (2) to have created an intellectual revolution, (3) to be the most important theologian since Calvin, (4) to have equaled


24. Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 16.

the magnitude of Kant’s revolution of philosophy,26 (5) to have turned apologetics head over heels,27 (6) to be the only significant advancement in apologetics since Thomas Aquinas.28

However, the transformation of Cornelius into “Copernicus” appears oddly hyperbolic when contrasted against Van Til’s own modesty and aversion to novelty.29 In the first place, rather than promoting theological revolutions, Van Til vehemently polemicized against the heterodox “newness” that was appearing all around him. His self-named catalog of opponents includes: Presbyterianism’s “new theology,”30 Princeton’s “new modernism” à la Barth and describe the significance of Van Til’s overall approach.” Similarly, idem, Cornelius Van Til, 3, comments, “I have been criticized for using such superlatives to describe Van Til, but I intend to use them again, and to defend that use, in the present volume.” At the same time, however, Frame admits that there is a need for a “sympathetic, comprehensive, critical analysis” of Van Til (ibid., 3).


27. Charles G. Dennison, History for a Pilgrim People, 120.


29. Regarding Van Til’s followers, Muether, Cornelius Van Til, 16, writes, “Some of them have made extravagant claims about Van Til and his legacy that would have embarrassed him. Disciples have lauded him as the most creative mind since Immanuel Kant and the greatest Christian thinker since John Calvin. The allegedly innovative features of his apologetic approach have been applauded for their proto-postmodernism and either credited or blamed for distancing both Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church from their American Presbyterian past.” William Edgar, “Introduction,” in Christian Apologetics, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 14, likewise asserts the following: “Cornelius Van Til is not the last word on apologetics, nor would he ever have claimed to be.”

30. Van Til, The Confession of 1967, 1, declares the following: “Should the Confession of 1967 be adopted by that church [i.e., the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America], an entirely new phase in its life will be ushered in. This is true because this proposed Confession gives expression to and

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Brunner, modernism’s “new hermeneutic,” the “new evangelicalism” and “new Protestantism” with their “new Christ,” and the “new synthesis theology” from the Netherlands. It is ironic therefore that some of Van Til’s interpreters have been quick to extol their “Copernicus” in terms of the very critique he leveled against his theological opponents—novelty.

In the second place, although he frequently wrote of Kant’s “Copernican revolution” in philosophy, Van Til never applied this is based upon a new theology. Our concern in this booklet, therefore, is with the nature of this new theology which will be given creedal status if this proposed Confession is adopted by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” Cf. idem, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 11–12.


34. Van Til, The New Synthesis, 10, describes this book as follows: “The thesis of this essay is that the change of direction in Holland is one which is marked by a turning away from the traditional Reformed Faith, and toward the reinterpretation (Umdeutung) of it in terms of the post-Kantian freedom-nature scheme of thought, and, in particular, of neo-orthodox theology. We shall be concerned chiefly with the new direction so far as it affects theology and, in particular, hermeneutics. But the new direction in theology and hermeneutics involves and presupposes the post-Kantian methodology of science and
description to his own work.\textsuperscript{35} To the contrary, following the long tradition of Protestant distaste for theological novelty exemplified by Calvin,\textsuperscript{36} Francis Turretin (1623–1687)\textsuperscript{37} and Charles Hodge (1797–1878),\textsuperscript{38} Van Til insisted that he did not build his apologetic \textit{de novo}.\textsuperscript{39} He intentionally described himself not as a revolutionary, but as a self-conscious inheritor of “Christianity as interpreted in philosophy as well. Finally, the new direction in theology is, apparently, effecting a new direction in the ecclesiastical situation of the \textit{Gereformeerde Kerken}.”

\textsuperscript{35} E.g., Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” in \textit{The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary}, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse and Paul Wooley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1967), 296, defines the term as follows: “Kant’s great contribution to philosophy consisted in stressing the activity of the experiencing subject. It is this point to which the idea of a Copernican revolution is usually applied.”


\textsuperscript{37} Francis Turretin, \textit{Institutes of Elenctic Theology}, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), I:xlii, writes: “Let other books, then, be commended by their novelty. I do not want this statement to justify mine. I avoided it most diligently lest it should contain anything new, a stranger from the word of God and from the public forms received in our churches, and nothing is built up there that is not confirmed by the vote of our most proven theologians of highest reputation.”

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the Reformed creeds, as championed by Kuyper, Bavinck, Hodge, Warfield and Machen.”

Van Til’s Placement of Apologetics in Theological Encyclopedia

The second line of evidence serves primarily as a conduit between the first and third, yet it is also significant in its own right, namely, the relationship between apologetics and systematic

39. Van Til, “My Credo,” 11, writes, “Seeing, therefore, the failure of even Reformed theologians and apologists in their efforts to defend consistently the self-attesting Christ of Scripture, it became clear to me that new ground work needed to be done. I did not, however, undertake this task de novo. I learned much from other men, just as I did in theology from Kuyper and Bavinck.”

40. Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 276. Similar self-descriptions by which Van Til aligns himself behind the classic modern Reformed theologians abound in his writings. E.g., idem, The Defense of the Faith, 103, asserts the following: “It is on the basis of the work of such men as Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, and B. B. Warfield, to mention no others, that we have formulated the broad outline of the Reformed life-and-world view. It is only by the help of such men that we have been enabled to attain to anything like a consistent Protestantism.” Idem, A Christian Theory of Knowledge, 23, further describes his reliance upon Reformed theologians as follows: “The greater part of what is presented here is due to the fact that the writer stands on the shoulders of the great Reformed thinkers mentioned above. He is merely gathering together the thoughts found over a widely diversified body of their writings in order to present briefly that which basically they have taught.” The theologians “mentioned above” include “the great Reformed dogmaticians of modern times, such as Charles Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, Shedd, Kuyper and especially Herman Bavinck. Back of all of them stands that master theologian and exegete of Scripture, John Calvin, whose writings have been constantly consulted” (see “Introduction,” n.p.; cf. ibid., 254). “It is to this basic approach,” Van Til similarly remarks, “of Kuyper and Bavinck, of Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos (ignoring or setting aside the remnants of the traditional method that is found in their works) that appeal is made in this work” (ibid., 20). Cf. idem, Christian Apologetics, 57n4, 101, 107n33, 115; idem, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 5–7, 13, 29n8, 70, 89, 89n1, 112n15, 320n4; idem, The Defense of the Faith, 2, 23–24, 27, 27n1, 103, 113, 143n43, 237, 264, 276, 284, 382, 395; idem, Common Grace and the Gospel, 33–34; Bahnsen, “Socrates or Christ,” 234; White, Van Til, Defender of the Faith, 34–36; Muether, Cornelius Van Til, 56.
theology in Van Til’s thought. In *Christian Apologetics* he explains this relationship as follows:

> It is apparent from our discussion so far that systematic theology is more closely related to apologetics than are any of the other disciplines. In it we have the system of truth that we are to defend.\(^{41}\)

Likewise, in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* Van Til argues that systematics arranges the fruits of exegesis and biblical theology “into a concatenated system” and that apologetics then defends and vindicates this system “against false philosophy and false science.”\(^{42}\)

In *The Defense of the Faith*, moreover, Van Til presents the relationship in similar terms yet again. Before one can defend the faith, he reasons, one must first know the faith that is to be defended. He thus avers that apologetics must receive its statement of faith from the other theological disciplines, especially systematic theology, before it can defend that faith.\(^{43}\) He cites the work of his

\(^{41}\) Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 23.

\(^{42}\) Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 17; cf. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), IX:51, 93. Van Til’s use of Warfield’s language (i.e., a “concatenated system”) is intentional; for, even though Van Til rejects Warfield’s position regarding the place of apologetics in theological encyclopedia and prefers Kuyper’s view instead (pace K. Scott Oliphint’s editorial note in Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 352n27), he attempts nonetheless to incorporate insights from Warfield’s view in order to prove his own Presbyterian credentials. For Van Til’s explications of the so-called “Old Princeton vs. Old Amsterdam” debates, see Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 345–82. (At 345n1 Van Til notes that most of this chapter recapitulates material from ch. 8 in *idem*, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 221–54. In this latter work Van Til further remarks that his argument presupposes the material found in *idem*, “Nature and Scripture.”)

Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian” former professor, Louis Berkhof, as an example of the Reformed system of faith.\textsuperscript{44}

To summarize Van Til’s position, apologetics relates to systematic theology as the scout relates to the general—the former receives his battle plans from the latter.\textsuperscript{45}

This position has obvious implications for how he views his task as an apologist. “I have never been called upon to work out any form of systematic theology,” asserts Van Til. “My business is to teach Apologetics. I therefore presuppose the Reformed system of doctrine.”\textsuperscript{46}

Leaving aside the obvious question which presents itself here—whether Van Til at times acted more as a theologian than an apologist\textsuperscript{47}—his stated job description raises a simple practical question in light of his formulation of the relationship between apologetics and systematics: if Van Til is not a theologian, then whose system of doctrine does he presuppose for his own apologetics? This question leads into our third line of evidence.

Van Til’s Appropriations of Bavinck’s Thought

In the preface to \textit{An Introduction to Systematic Theology} Van Til makes a modest statement regarding his reliance upon earlier theologians. “My indebtedness,” he writes, “to such former

\textsuperscript{44} Van Til, \textit{The Defense of the Faith}, 28–29.

\textsuperscript{45} I am summarizing Van Til’s own martial metaphors—the messenger boy, the scout, the big guns and little guns, etc.—which he uses to describe the relationship between apologetics and systematics. See Van Til, \textit{Christian Apologetics}, 18–23; \textit{idem}, \textit{An Introduction to Systematic Theology}, 18–19.

\textsuperscript{46} Van Til, \textit{The Defense of the Faith}, 27.

\textsuperscript{47} So Frame, \textit{Cornelius Van Til}, 299; \textit{idem}, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” 295–300. Likewise, Bahnsen, \textit{Van Til’s Apologetic}, 15, argues that Van Til is at least as much of a theologian as an apologist, if not more the former than the latter. An outstanding example of Van Til’s own creation of new theological formulations is his idiosyncratic formulation of the doctrine of the trinity as “one person” and “three persons.” See Van Til, \textit{An Introduction to Systematic Theology}, 363–68, 363n45; cf. Frame, \textit{Cornelius Van Til}, 65–71; Lane G. Tipton, “The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004).
Reformed theologians as Louis Berkhof and, back of him, Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper, is apparent throughout.” A comparison of Van Til’s work with Bavinck’s and with Berkhof’s writings, however, reveals that his passing comment is significantly understated; for, throughout the book he appropriates extensive amounts of Bavinck’s and Berkhof’s works, sometimes paraphrasing them, other times copying them thought-for-thought, word-for-word, frequently without citation. Specifically, he appropriates Bavinck’s thought in the following three ways.

First, Van Til explicitly references Bavinck’s name nearly 100 times. In chapters 2 and 3, for example, Van Til admits that his thoughts on Christian epistemology are a summary of Berkhof’s and Bavinck’s more detailed presentations of theological principia. In chapter 5, Van Til again summarizes Bavinck’s formulations of theological principia, even translating two passages from Bavinck’s *Dogmatiek* into English before criticizing Bavinck’s alleged inconsistencies. Similarly, Van Til begins chapter 6 by summarizing Bavinck’s historical analysis of conceptions of revelation. In chapter 15, moreover, Van Til’s discussions of innate


49. William Edgar, in the “Introduction” to Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 5, writes, “The last chapters on the doctrine of God follow Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* rather closely.” However, Van Til follows Bavinck closely not only in the latter chapters but throughout the book. For example, his first explicit appropriation of Bavinck’s thought is found in ch. 2 (pp. 29ff.), which Edgar himself notes (29n8, 70n32). I am choosing to omit Kuyper in the following analysis since Van Til only references Kuyper tangentially and does not appropriate his writings to the same extent as he does Berkhof’s and Bavinck’s. For Van Til’s explicit references to Kuyper, see pp. 17–18, 50–55, 349n3; Pp. 379–85 are possibly an implicit appropriation of Kuyper’s thought (cf. Edgar’s editorial note, 379n36). On Berkhof’s appropriation of Bavinck’s thought, see note 74 below.


51. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 89–91. For an analysis of Van Til’s criticisms herein and elsewhere, see Mattson, “Van Til on Bavinck.”

and acquired knowledge of God are prefaced with the assertion that if we begin with Bavinck’s view then “we cannot go far wrong,” and his entire treatment of these topics is a critical discussion of Bavinck’s formulations. Additionally, in chapters 16 and 18 Van Til’s explications of God’s incommunicable and communicable attributes are largely summaries of Bavinck’s formulations. Even in Van Til’s discussion of the trinity in chapter 17, which incorporates a wider compendium of theologians than his other chapters, Van Til nevertheless gives Bavinck the predominant theological voice.

Second, in addition to these extensive explicit references, Van Til tacitly appropriates large amounts of Bavinck’s thought especially in his chapters on the doctrine of God. For example, in chapter 10 Van Til’s presentation of “the names used to indicate special revelation” and “the modes of special revelation” — nearly

53. Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 310, 314.
54. Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 323–47. Van Til explicitly references Bavinck’s Dogmatiek throughout this section at 323n8, 327nn15–16, 333n27, 334nn28–30, and 335n31. Cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes regarding Van Til’s appropriation of Bavinck’s thought at 335nn32–33 and 341n53.
55. Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 369–97. Van Til explicitly references Bavinck’s Dogmatiek throughout this section at 370n3; 371nn4–5, nn8–9, n11; 372nn12–13; 373n17; 377n29; 378n32; and 388n50. Cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes at 369n1, 371n10, 374n19, 375n23, 377n28, 378n33, 379n36, 385n40, 386n43, 388n49, 390n54, 391n56, 392n57, 394n63, and 396n66.
57. Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 348–68; Note Van Til’s references to Kuyper (349n3), Berkhof (350n5), A. A. Hodge (351n7), W. G. T. Shedd (352n9), Calvin (352n10), B. B. Warfield (352n11, 360n34, 361nn35–38), Charles Hodge (355n23, 357n27).
58. See Van Til’s references to Bavinck at 353n12, 354nn17–19, 355n21, 362n42, 363n43, 364n46; cf. William Edgar’s editorial notes at 348n1, 349n4, 353n12, n14, 354n20.
20 pages of material—is a close synopsis of Bavinck’s longer treatment of the exact same topics, yet without citation. Similarly, Van Til’s discussion of the names of God in chapter 16 is a virtual reproduction of Bavinck’s presentation, again without citation.

Third, beyond explicit citations and tacit appropriations, several of Van Til’s apologetic motifs derive from Bavinck’s thought. For example, Van Til’s programatic statement regarding humanity’s epistemological duty to “think God’s thoughts after him” is rooted in Bavinck’s assertion that “a theologian’s sole responsibility is to think God’s thoughts after him and to reproduce the unity that is objectively present in the thoughts of God and has been recorded for the eye of faith in Scripture.” Likewise, Van Til’s programatic


Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian” insistence that the ontological trinity is the necessary presupposition of all predication is adumbrated—according to Van Til’s own evaluation—in Bavinck’s critique of the followers of Berkouwer whom he labels as the “Cahiers men.” Furthermore, given his praise of “the analogical system of Bavinck” in opposition to Aquinas, Van Til’s repeated insistence that humans can only know God analogically is likely a recapitulation of Bavinck’s formulations regarding analogical knowledge of God. Also, Van Til’s seemingly odd statements regarding the epistemological necessity of circular reasoning are recapitulations of Bavinck’s formulations regarding the circularity inherent in theology’s formulations as a recapitulation of Bavinck’s; See, e.g., Cornelius Van Til, “Review of Paedagogische Beginselen, Dr. H. Bavinck, Derde Druk (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928) and De Nieuwe Opvoeding, Dr. H. Bavinck, Tweede Druk, (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928),” Princeton Theological Review 27 (1929): 135–36.

65. E.g., Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 59, writes, “Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition”; cf. ibid., 13, 80–81, 124, etc.


69. Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 2:47–52, 70, 107–111, 121, 130, 131, 134, 136, 137, 186; cf. Diehl, “Divine Omniscience,” 50. Michael S. Horton, “Consistently Reformed: The Inheritance and Legacy of Van Til’s Apologetic,” in Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 131–148, argues that Van Til inherited the Creator-creature distinction and its correlate, analogical reasoning, “from the Amsterdam school” (p. 135); however, he does not note that it is from Bavinck specifically that Van Til appropriates the phrase “thinking God’s thoughts after him” nor that it is from Bavinck and Berkhof specifically that Van Til appropriates the language of theological principia.

principia, especially as these formulations are summarized by Berkhof.

On the basis of these three types of appropriations clearly evident throughout Van Til’s An Introduction to Systematic Theology, the answer to our question—From whom does Van Til the apologist receive his statement of the Reformed faith?—is largely Herman Bavinck.

**Brief Analysis**

Van Til’s extensive appropriation of Bavinck’s thought is not surprising when the following pieces are put together: (1) Van Til identified himself as an inheritor of Reformed theology, not an innovator; (2) His view of theological encyclopedia necessitates that apologetics receives its statement of faith from systematics; (3) He defined himself as an apologist, not a dogmatician; (4) He esteemed Bavinck as the greatest of the modern Reformed theologians. Ergo, on his own terms it makes sense that Van Til would frequently appropriate materials from the dogmatician who had produced “the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times.”

Neither is Van Til’s extensive appropriation of Bavinck’s thought novel. In fact, Van Til could be viewed as simply following the example of his own teacher, Louis Berkhof, who appropriated Bavinck’s theology even more pervasively than did Van Til.


72. Pace Frame, Cornelius Van Til, 301–09, and Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 143n144, 170n42, 201–02, 214n116, 218n128, 284–85, 482–83, 518n122, both of whom attempt to analyze Van Til’s formulations regarding circularity without comparing Berkhof’s and Bavinck’s formulations, Van Til virtually repeats the formulation of Berkhof, Introduction To Systematic Theology, 125–26.

73. Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 89.

Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian”

Furthermore, Bavinck’s neo-Calvinist theology casts a large shadow over Reformed theology on both sides of the Atlantic.\(^75\) In addition to Van Til and Berkhof, Bavinck’s influence can be clearly seen in the writings of B. B. Warfield,\(^76\) Gerrit Berkouwer,\(^77\) Anthony Hoekema,\(^78\) Herman Hoeksema,\(^79\) Gordon Spykman,\(^80\) Carl Henry,\(^81\) John Frame,\(^82\) and Van Genderen and Velema.\(^83\) Also, several recent studies investigate Bavinck’s influence upon Karl Barth,\(^84\)
Geerhardus Vos, the Reformed epistemology movement, and the reception of geology in the Dutch-Reformed tradition. The magnitude of Bavinck’s influence is being analyzed more and more as scholars are reading Bavinck in English. Therefore, viewed within the context of Bavinck’s transatlantic influence, Van Til’s extensive appropriation of Bavinck’s thought is slightly less jarring; for, Van Til is one among many American theologians who sought


78. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986); *idem*, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Also note that Hoekema completed two dissertations on Bavinck, including, *idem*, “The Centrality of the Heart: A Study in Christian Anthropology with Special Reference to the Psychology of Herman Bavinck” (Th.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1948); *idem*, “Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant” (Th.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953).


82. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*.


Neither “Copernican” nor “Van Tilian” to transplant the cream of the neo-Calvinist dogmatics crop into the fields of American Reformed theology.

CONCLUSIONS

Two conclusions may be drawn from our brief investigation of Van Til’s neo-Calvinist context, his high esteem for Bavinck, the nascent reassessment of Bavinck’s influence in Van Til scholarship, and Van Til’s appropriations of Bavinck’s thought.

First, the Copernican interpretation of Van Til is untenable. Even though his heritage cannot be reduced to one source, Van Til is more accurately interpreted as a neo-Calvinist rather than a Copernican revolutionary insofar as he appropriates extensively from Bavinck’s dogmatics. Likewise, usage of the adjective “Van Tilian” does not accurately reflect Van Til’s own modesty, his aversion to novelty, nor his extensive appropriations of Bavinck’s thought.

Second, even though several recent studies evince a growing...


awareness of Bavinck’s influence upon Van Til’s thought, there is much more work to be done. For example, no one has analyzed the extensive appropriations of Bavinck’s thought throughout *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Furthermore, Van Til’s polemics have not been studied in light of his reliance upon Bavinck’s thought, despite the fact that Van Til’s uses Bavinck’s dogmatics as the primary theological criterion by which he (1) vehemently rejects Barth’s theology, (2) criticizes Berkouwer’s later theology as a devolution from Bavinck to Barth, and (3) polemicizes against what he terms the “new synthesis theology” of the Netherlands. Similarly, no one has studied Van Til’s appropriation of Kuyper’s formulations regarding the two kinds of science, nor Bavinck’s differences with Kuyper on this point. An analysis of Van Til’s idiosyncratic deviations from Bavinck’s formulation of the doctrine of the trinity also remains outstanding.

The English translations of Bavinck’s works offer Van Til scholars an unprecedented opportunity to re-read the Reformed apologist in light of his primary dogmatic resource. Since Bavinck’s pervasive theological influence upon Van Til’s thought is undeniable, then, to borrow Van Til’s metaphor, the scouts need to report back to the general for a reassessment of the battlefield. Only in this way can an adequate assessment be made of Van Til’s presupposition of the Reformed system of doctrine.