

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 18 | Number 4

Article 2

---

June 1990

## Philosophical Assumptions in North American Presbyterian Theology

John C. Vander Stelt  
*Dordt College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vander Stelt, John C. (1990) "Philosophical Assumptions in North American Presbyterian Theology," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 18: No. 4, 9 - 19.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol18/iss4/2](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol18/iss4/2)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Philosophical Assumptions in North American Presbyterian Theology

John C. Vander Stelt  
Professor of Theology and Philosophy



*Dr. John C. Vander Stelt has been on the Dordt College faculty since 1968. He has published **Philosophy and Scripture: A Study of Old Princeton and Westminster Theology** (1978). From 1979 to 1987 he was the Executive Secretary of the International Council for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education.*

The focus of this article is an historical survey of basic philosophical assumptions in North American Presbyterian thought and action from approximately the middle of eighteenth until the middle of the twentieth century.

Presbyterian thinking at Princeton College since 1746, Princeton Theological Seminary since 1812, and Westminster Theological Seminary since 1929 is, like other ways of thinking and contrary to its self-image, culturally conditioned. Despite its belief that its view of reality and faith is objective and universally valid and therein transcends historical subjectivity and cultural limitations, Presbyterian theology in North America has been strongly influenced by philosophical assumptions that are unique to a specific period in Scotto-American culture.

## Scottish Origin

Influential Scotch-Irish Presbyterian immigrants, who during the middle of the eighteenth century settled chiefly in the mid-Atlantic colonies, introduced a number of Scottish philosophical ideas into North American thinking.

Through a veritable cultural renaissance, the relatively small country of Scotland played a very important role for several decades within a major

segment of Western thought and action. Central to this renaissance was the rise of the culturally formative movement of common sense thought or philosophy of realism.

Expanding on new ideas developed by two Presbyterian professors in Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, Gershom Carmichael (1672-1729) and Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), **Thomas Reid** (1710-1796) was the first major spokesman of this unique philosophical movement. Reid feared the skepticism inherent in the radical empiricism of the Irish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) and the idealism implied in the views of the English thinker, George Berkeley (1685-1753). Reid rejected their common epistemic premise of *idea-ism*. Instead, he stressed the role of rationally reliable common sense principles at the core of the human mind.

Embedded in the mental constitution of each person are a number of self-evident principles. Being intuited, these experiential and universal principles need no ratiocination. They are unassailable by any doubt and essential to all belief. They belong to the very essence of human intellect, accompany all human sensations and memories, and guarantee the veracity of everything rational beings know and do. Whereas presuppositions require proof via deduc-

tion or reasoning from self-evident propositions, by virtue of the fact that they are *a priori* axioms lodged in the human mind “first principles” need no proof or demonstration at all.

People possess not only three basic intellectual powers, as Locke and Hume had maintained, viz., simple apprehension, judgment, and reasoning, but nine fundamental mental capacities, viz., external sense, memory, conception, abstraction, judgment, reasoning, taste, moral perception, and consciousness.

As one of these intellectual powers, “judgment” accompanies every human sense perception. It enables all rational beings to know immediately and intuitively external things themselves. Human beings are not, as suggested by radical empiricism, *passive receivers* of images (of things) imprinted, via sensation, on their minds. Rather, they are *active perceivers* aware of both the *act* and *objects* of their perception, and do not doubt that these objects really exist.

This belief in the actual existence of perceived objects precedes all argumentation and is suggested by the human rational constitution, a suggestion which the handiwork of the Almighty himself supports. In his first two books Reid used as mottoes “The inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding” and “[God] hath put wisdom in their inward parts.”

Committed to the continuity-postulate inherent in the natural science-ideal, Reid endorsed Pope’s idea that one must “account for moral things as for natural things.” Modeling his thinking especially after the methods of Newton’s *natural* philosophy, Reid believed he could establish and enlarge the boundaries of *moral* philosophy. In their natural as well as their moral life, including religion, people experience and know reality not as a “fiction of human imagination” but as a concrete “touchstone” and even “voice of God.”<sup>2</sup>

In slightly modified ways—for example, “first principles” are now called “fundamental beliefs”—Reid’s philosophy became widely known in Scotland, France, and North America through its philosophical systematizer and popularizer, Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), and the erudite compiler and somewhat neo-Kantian commentator of Reid and Stewart, Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856).

## Popularizers

Through their extensive writings, two Presbyterian clergymen, **James Beattie** (1735-1803) and **James Oswald** (d. 1793), played key roles in using Reid’s philosophy in the Presbyterian struggle against the twin-threats of skepticism and idealism. Especially Beattie’s *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1770) and Oswald’s *Appeal to Common Sense on Behalf of Religion* (1772) made Reid’s philosophy readily accessible and understandable to Presbyterian preachers and professors throughout Scotland, England, and North America. With tremendous apologetic fervor these two Scottish clergymen applied common sense philosophy to everything associated with Christian faith life, including human perception of trans-empirical, supra-natural truths.

A third influential advocate of Reidian realism was the nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian philosopher and revivalist, Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847). In *On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as Manifested in the Adaptation of External Nature to the Moral and Intellectual Constitution of Man* (1833), Chalmers discussed in great detail the rational conscience of human beings as the “vicegerent within the heart,” through which human moral character, and even God’s righteousness, can be rationally inferred. Natural science and moral philosophy precede Scriptural revelation and are complementary to religion and theology.<sup>3</sup>

## Princeton College

Presbyterian church leaders and educators in North America gratefully and uncritically accepted this Scottish idea of *rational* certainty. They equated rational certainty with *confessional* certitude and, thereby, attempted to keep at arm’s length the devastating effects of epistemic skepticism on theology and to curtail the implications of atheistic naturalism for practical faith.

Through this fusion of common sense philosophy with Presbyterian theology, Log College (est. 1735), Princeton College (est. 1746), Princeton Theological Seminary (est. 1812), and Westminster Theological Seminary (est. 1929) exerted an enormous influence on the training of numerous Presbyterian church leaders. In the case of Princeton College before, during, and after the American

Revolution, this influence was equally evident in the formal training of many important civic leaders.

One person who stands out in this North American tradition of Presbyterian higher education is **John Witherspoon** (1723-1794). As President of Princeton College from 1768-1794, he labored feverishly to train future leaders for a young and new nation by making them think about natural or scientific, societal or moral, and ecclesiastical or theological issues in terms of the basic assumptions or beliefs of common sense philosophy.

The ecclesiastical need for clear articulation and rational defense of Christian faith coincided with the national need for a new social order in politics and economics. Having been trained at the University of Edinburgh in Moral Philosophy, Witherspoon was convinced that common sense philosophy was the best theoretical and educational way to meet these needs at that critical period in North American history and culture.

Largely due to Witherspoon's prominent role as educator at Princeton College, for more than a century this Scottish common sense view of human nature, truth, and society dominated North American educational and cultural developments, especially in the crucial areas of economics, political science, and theology.

Already in Scotland, Witherspoon had been well-known for two decades as a staunch defender of Presbyterian orthodoxy against subtle and fierce attacks of radical Enlightenment thinkers. Upon his arrival at Princeton College in 1768, he immediately introduced Scottish realism into the entire curriculum. Using his presidential prerogatives, he even went so far as to outlaw on Princeton's campus any instruction or private study of Berkeley's idealism and Hume's skepticism. He became the first professor in North America to teach a course in Moral Philosophy. From the very beginning, he made it clear that both quantitative (or primary) qualities and sensory (or secondary) qualities are rationally objective, that true beliefs are based on original rational truths, and that certainty is ultimately anchored in self-evident intuitions and convictions of the human mind.

In light of these fundamental philosophical assumptions, Witherspoon viewed Scripture as a textbook containing individual facts, and viewed doctrines as a system of rational ideas derived inductively from the written Word. Though revela-

tion is *above* reason, it is not against it; though it is *super*-natural, it remains harmonizable with reason. In a reflective moment, Witherspoon once remarked: "I confess it is agreeable to me to show that the truths of the everlasting gospel are agreeable to sound reason, and founded upon the state of human nature; and I have made it my business through my life to illustrate this remark."<sup>4</sup> Infidels are wrong, asserted Witherspoon, because they depart from the rationality of Scripture.

Witherspoon injected a deliberate apologetic element into North American Presbyterian theology; and his successors at Princeton College and, subsequently, at Princeton Theological Seminary became strong advocates of "common sense" apologetics. In his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, he stated that even though personal and societal laws were not derived from Scripture and are, therefore, neither revelational nor theological, they are perfectly reliable and acceptable. After all, as rational principles they are in complete agreement with the truths derived from Scripture.

**Sammuel Stanhope Smith** (1750-1819), Witherspoon's pupil and successor at Princeton College, accommodated Scripture to common sense philosophy in an even more pronounced manner. Continuing his predecessor's relentless battle against Humean skepticism, Smith developed a system of natural religion that was based completely on rigorous induction and close observation of rational laws in human experience.

Whereas in conflicts between philosophy and Scripture, Smith leaned towards Scottish realism, **Ashbel Green** (1762-1848), President of Princeton College from 1812-1822 and one of the Directors of Princeton Theological Seminary from 1812-1848, tended to stress Scripture and the Westminster Confession when confronted by such conflicts, even though in his class lectures he continued to use Witherspoon's published lectures on Moral Philosophy.

Green's great admiration for Witherspoon's fusion of common sense philosophy with Scripture determined to a large extent the manner in which for many decades professors at Princeton Theological Seminary defended the Christian faith against attacks by infidels and explained biblical doctrines in opposition to heresy.

**James McCosh** (1811-1894) was, like John Witherspoon, for years a Presbyterian preacher and

professor in Scotland and president of Princeton College from 1868 to 1888. A few years before his death, he remarked that the most significant feature of Witherspoon's reforms consisted in his attention "to the study of the nature and constitution of the human mind. . . ." <sup>5</sup> Representing North American philosophy at the World's Great Exposition of Chicago in 1893, he stated in a major speech that "a philosophy which does not . . . begin with Reality must always have something insecure in its foundation" <sup>6</sup> and that "the granite and primitive rock of rest and security are provided by the standards of consciousness and fact." He went on to say,

Americans will never match the Germans or Oxonians in expounding transcendentalism. . . . They will be employed vastly better, and more in accordance with the genius of their country, in defending a sober realism which opposes materialism and yet does not fly up in idealism. There must be more teachers of mental and moral science in the United States than in any other nation in the world. <sup>7</sup>

Whereas Witherspoon *introduced* common sense philosophy into North American education and theology, one hundred years later McCosh *symbolized* its significant impact on North American culture and society. At the same time, he marked the beginning of its dissipation as the dominant school of thought in an increasing number of North American colleges and universities. During his lifetime and several decades thereafter, common sense thinking continued to be prevalent, however, at Princeton Theological Seminary and many other theological schools founded throughout North America during the nineteenth century. <sup>8</sup>

### Princeton Theological Seminary

During the first years of Princeton Theological Seminary, Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), Samuel Miller (1769-1850), and Charles Hodge (1797-1878) formed a kind of theological and professorial triumvirate. Alexander, the nestor and directing spirit of the new seminary, became "the founder of official Presbyterian thought in America." <sup>9</sup> The fundamental tenets of Scottish philosophy of realism which he injected into Presbyterian theology were never questioned by his

colleagues and successors at Princeton Theological Seminary, including Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886), Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921), Francis Patton (1843-1937), and Casper Wistar Hodge, Jr. (1870-1937).

One person who greatly influenced **Archibald Alexander** was Reverend William Graham (1745-1799), a graduate of Princeton College. Graham possessed a copy of all the works of Thomas Reid and James Beattie. This gifted thinker and pastor, who became Alexander's personal friend and official mentor, firmly believed that resolving all sorts of theological problems called for making a careful study of "first principles" or "plain maxims of common sense," i.e., invincible and incontrovertible beliefs embedded in the rational constitution of the human mind. For years, Alexander visited Graham once or twice per week to recite and debate matters of philosophy and theology. <sup>10</sup>

As to its philosophical assumptions, Archibald Alexander's theology consisted of post-reformation scholasticism (his students had to study Francis Turretine's *Insitutio Theologicae Elencticae*) combined with Scottish common sense philosophy. In his *Outlines of Moral Philosophy*, he uncritically adopted the common sense views of Scottish philosophers as Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart and theologians like James Beattie and James Oswald. This study, which Charles Hodge considered to contain the epitomy of ethical reasoning, was so thoroughly Reidian that Sydney Ahlstrom once remarked,

Any reader unaware that its author was one of the nation's inflexible champions of the Old School Calvinism would assume on reading this book by itself, that it was written, perhaps, by some mild English Latitudinarian bent on mediating the views of Butler, Reid and Price. <sup>11</sup>

Perhaps more than any other book he wrote, *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures* (1836) clearly reflects the influence of Scottish realism on his theology. The impact of this classic study on Presbyterian thinking about Scripture has been phenomenal. Reason is an essentially sinless and impartial "voice" which produces "self-evident truths." Only through reason can the objective

system of truths revealed in the infallible Scriptures be understood. The information provided by Scripture must be added to the information provided by reason. The revelation of Scripture is rationally clear, reliable, and well-attested. Without such rational revelation, society and civilization soon deteriorate.

Fundamental to this revelation are the three phenomena of divine intervention in the ordinary course of nature and human affairs: "miracles," "prophecies," and "inspiration." Of these three phenomena, miracles are the most important since prophecies and inspiration are actually only manifestations of miracles.

Using the idea of "miracle" and implied notions of prophecy and inspiration as cornerstone, Alexander laid the foundation for subsequent Presbyterian reflection on Scripture. He writes,

Why should it be thought unreasonable that God should sometimes depart from his common mode of acting, to answer great and valuable ends? What is there in the established course of nature so sacred or immutable, that it must never or for any purpose be changed? The only reason why the laws of nature are uniform, is, that this is for the benefit of man, but if his interest requires a departure from the regular course, what is there to render it unreasonable? The author of the universe has never bound himself to pursue one undeviating course, in the government of the world. The time may come when he may think it proper to change the whole system. As he gave it a beginning, he may also give it an end. . . . [B]ut by the sophistry of infidels a strange darkness has been thrown over the subject, so that it seems to be thought that there would be something immoral, or unwise and inconsistent, in contravening the laws of nature.<sup>12</sup>

Being the First and Great Cause, He who established the laws of nature can also suspend them. It is rational to believe that all things are possible with God and that "whatever is possible may be believed on sufficient testimony, which testimony, however, must be strong in proportion to the improbability of the event confirmed."<sup>13</sup>

Alexander's idea of divine suspension of the entire system and government of the world is subject, however, to the limitation and reach of the laws of reason(ing). He states,

The plain truth is that in all cases, the fact which has most evidence is most probable, whether it be miraculous or natural. And when all evidence relating to a position is before the mind, **that is true which is easiest to be believed**, because it is easier to believe with evidence than against it. We are willing, therefore, that this maxim, as now stated, should be the ground of our decision, and we pledge ourselves to prove that the falsehood of the miracles of the gospel would be more improbable, and consequently more incredible, than the truth of the facts recorded in them.<sup>14</sup>

Genuine, i.e., miraculous, inspiration of the Bible writers appears in three forms: as "superintendence," "suggestion," and "elevation." "Superintendence" results in an infallible selection of facts and circumstances, "suggestion" in the Spirit's immediate communication of truths unknown to humans before, and "elevation" in an extra-ordinary or sublime human functioning based on divine assistance.

Since each of these three forms and facets of inspiration is plenary, an all-or-nothing mentality results. If it can be shown, for example, that Bible writers have "fallen into palpable mistakes in facts of minor importance, it would be impossible to demonstrate that they wrote anything by inspiration."<sup>15</sup> Knowledge and faith require for their objective foundation an infallible certainty based on plenary inspiration. It requires "**Such a divine influence upon the minds of the sacred writers as rendered them exempt from error, both in regard to the ideas and words.**"<sup>16</sup>

We need not distrust "our intuitive judgments, our senses, and the clear deductions of reason."<sup>17</sup> Not even the loss of the original and infallible autographa can rob rational Christians of reliable and unshakable knowledge. God's supranatural actions, Scripture's inspiration, and human understanding of Scripture are all factually infallible and rationally reliable.

Most nineteenth-century Princeton theologians, including Charles Hodge, Archibald A. Hodge, and

Benjamin B. Warfield,<sup>18</sup> assumed and never questioned the validity of this basic tenet of Scottish common sense realism.

### Westminster Theological Seminary

Two men who have left an indelible impact on Westminster Theological Seminary are J. Gresham Machen and Cornelius Van Til.

Throughout his life, **J. Gresham Machen** (1881-1937) was a strong defender of classical Presbyterianism, especially with respect to Scripture, and a vigorous advocate of the main tenets of common sense philosophy with respect to human nature, truth, and society.

In opposition to liberalism, Machen emphasized the objective and intellectual rather than the subjective and emotional side of human beings and knowledge. He stressed doctrines, not life, propositions, not symbols, truths, not experiences, observation, not interpretation, particular facts, not universal meanings, induction, not deduction, and Scripture, not the teaching of Jesus. Scripture is “a great logically consistent body of truth.”<sup>19</sup> As a clear and objective record of revelation, it is accessible to scientific investigation and verification and calls for intellectual assent of faith. A truly scientific person is “convinced of the truth of Christianity whether he were a saint or a demon. . . .”<sup>20</sup> As an infallible “record of facts,”<sup>21</sup> Scripture requires an apologetics which establishes the (formal) veracity of Scripture before its (material) content can be understood. In his *The Attack Upon Princeton Seminary: A Plea for Fair Play*, Machen wrote,

Even prior to any belief in the infallibility of Scripture, a scientific treatment of the sources of information will. . . lead the historian to hold that Jesus of Nazareth was raised on the third day. . . . Our view of the Bible is not the beginning, but it is rather the end, of an orderly defence of the Christian religion. First the general truth of the Bible in its great outlines as an historical book, and the supernatural origin of the revelation that it contains, then the full truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God, that is the order of our apologetic.<sup>22</sup>

Scripture is “a wonderfully common sense book” which “goes straight along the path of common

sense” and “confirms the common judgment of mankind that mind is one thing and matter another, and that both truly exist.”<sup>23</sup> Because it is “a plain book addressed to plain men,” the Bible “means exactly what it says” and a new Reformation is possible only when people “return to plain common honesty and common sense.”<sup>24</sup> Science and religion are compatible. In response to people who affirm religion but reject science, Machen states that we “are obliged to keep, by God’s help, to the high, rough, intellectualistic road of a sound epistemology.”<sup>25</sup>

Looking at reality through lenses of Scottish philosophy and Baconian inductionism, Machen developed ideas about truth, Scripture, and faith which dovetailed with his individualistic and libertarian views on all kinds of practical issues in social, economic, and political life. Just as isolated facts are the original building-blocks for systems of truth, so individual persons are the primary components for different arrangements of society.

As theologian, Machen did not want to read Scripture in terms of the relativity of cultural situations but stressed the rational and objective character of biblical revelation. It is ironic, however, that as churchman and citizen he could not escape the impact on his theology of an ideology heavily influenced by Scottish common sense philosophy and widely accepted in North American culture. The rationalism and individualism inherent in this Scotto-American ideology resulted in his commitment to such things as inductive logic, empiricistic science, economic laissez-faire capitalism, political atomism, and social contract theories.

As a civil libertarian, Machen strongly opposed governmental legislation concerning education, liquor, child labor, army, alien residents, jaywalking, recreation, women’s rights, and copyrights. In Jeffersonian-Reidian fashion, he placed the individual before the communal and fulminated against any soul killing collectivism or standardization of governmental powers.<sup>26</sup> Integral to his libertarian view of society was his vehement rejection of centralized church administration and his strong defense of the principle of “private judgment.”<sup>27</sup>

In his study on “method” in seventeenth-century Enlightenment, Peter A. Schouls has made some relevant observations concerning this libertarian aspect of North American culture and Presbyterian

theology. His comments about the close relationship between John Locke's view of man and society and his view of Scripture are equally applicable to the main philosophical assumptions of North American Presbyterian thinkers and their views of society and Scripture. He writes,

In this context it is of interest to note that, in today's world, we find Locke's political principles acted out most consistently by those committed to an individualistic and capitalistic view of politics and economics. It may be no accident that some of the most successful politicians and businessmen who are committed to this kind of view in politics and economics are also the staunchest defenders of the inerrancy of the Scriptures in terms of the view that the Scriptures present us with a body of indubitable truths presented in propositional form. And it may be no accident that some of the leading theologians of the fundamentalist movement are staunch supporters of free-enterprise capitalism. These facts are perhaps not surprising because it is the same methodological stance which gives rise to the politics of individualism, to the economics of inalienable and individual rights to the products of one's labour, and to the theology which takes the Scriptures to be a body of truths in propositional form.<sup>28</sup>

For the last two hundred years, this ascription of ontic and epistemic priority to the individual has significantly influenced the perspective of numerous North American Presbyterian thinkers about man, society, and culture. Their view of Scripture coincided with their view of the primacy of the individual and life in a democratic society. Presbyterian theologians from Witherspoon to Machen always stressed the importance of personal liberty, social contracts, free competition, private judgment, private property, and laissez-faire capitalism, and attempted to sanction their view of reality and society with an appeal to God's providence and divine wisdom.

This unique North American view of morality, society, and culture is directly related to a similarly distinctive feature of North American Presbyterian theology.<sup>29</sup> Typical of this culture and

theology is an ethos which favors voluntarism in society and congregationalism in church-life. Principles of common sense philosophy as applied by Adam Smith, Reid's predecessor at the University of Glasgow, to political economy were uncritically "taught in textbooks written by American clergymen."<sup>30</sup> Because of these philosophical assumptions operative in North American Presbyterianism, it becomes understandable that today many evangelical, Bible-believing Christians endorse libertarian views and some form of civil religion.<sup>31</sup>

The precise role of **Cornelius Van Til** (1895-1987) as Reformed thinker in North American Presbyterianism is not easy to determine. A few years after the establishment of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, Van Til once suggested to Machen (during a long train-ride) that because of significant differences between them on certain philosophical assumptions, especially with respect to the nature and role of traditional Princeton apologetics, he, i.e., Van Til, should perhaps leave Westminster Theological Seminary and not cause any additional problems for Machen as seminary-founder. Machen's response to this suggestion was curt and clear: "I know we disagree, but I want you to stay."<sup>32</sup>

Throughout his life, Van Til has fought a relentless battle against what he called the Arminian twin-danger of "autonomy" and "individualism," both of which he believed to be present in the enlightenment philosophy of common sense realism. Joseph Butler (1692-1752), an English theologian whose views resembled those of Scottish common sense philosophers, best symbolized these two evils, and his form of apologetics was uncritically accepted, Van Til believed, by Princeton theologians ever since Witherspoon and well into the twentieth century.

Van Til strongly opposed traditional Princeton views about such things as "fact," "reason," "reality," "certainty," and "revelation." Facts are not isolated entities. What is needed is Scriptural confrontation, not Butlerian philosophical argumentation. God's existence does not depend on rational conclusions arrived at inductively. Presbyterian thinkers have erred in ascribing ontic priority to individual existence. They failed to acknowledge the ultimate conflict between Christian and non-Christian thinking. Since it is impossible for rational



beings to reason independent of God, they must sooner or later succumb to the meaninglessness of non-being and non-rationality.

The stance of this Arminian apologetics, based on assumptions of Reidian realism and Butler's rationalism and advocated by traditional Princeton theologians, Van Til personifies as "Mr. Grey." Implied in this position is a lowering of the objective claims of the Gospel and a compromise of the "ethical" antithesis.<sup>33</sup>

Rejecting this approach, Van Til makes Scripture the epistemic cornerstone of certainty and apologetics. Scripture needs no *proof*. It is the great *presupposition* in all thinking. Facts need no subjective interpretation but only objective reinterpretation. Believers do not move, inductively, toward a rational system but, deductively, from Scripture and the system of truth contained in it.

In response to the criticism of some fundamentalists that he is "philosophical" and of some liberals that he is "biblicistic,"<sup>34</sup> Van Til said that when the "terminology of philosophy" is used, it must always be made clear that its "meaning is exclusively derived from the Bible as the Word of God."<sup>35</sup>

Van Til firmly believed he had simply taken his "basic method and procedure from Scripture, not from Hegel, Bradley, and Bosanquet."<sup>36</sup> However, what he did in his apologetics was not a simple but a complex affair. As student at Calvin College, he studied F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, and at Calvin Theological Seminary he "read Kuyper and Bavinck assiduously and followed them through thick and thin."<sup>37</sup> As a graduate student at Princeton University from 1925 to 1927, he studied under Archibald A. Bowman (1883-1936), an avid proponent of neo-idealism developed by T. H. Green, B. Bosanquet, and F. H. Bradley. Personal comments in his copy of Bowman's major work *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* (Vols. I-II)<sup>38</sup> indicate that Van Til carefully studied this work in 1938, 1961, and 1966. In his doctoral dissertation on "God and the Absolute," he gave a detailed analysis, as well as critical evaluation, of several basic assumptions in the philosophy of British Idealism.

Ever since his student days, Van Til made positive use of such idealistic concepts as "one-and-many," "Concrete Universal," and "Absolute." His view of reality implied a method of apologetics in which

the direction of thinking—unlike the one inherent in the inductive method of empiricism and realism—moves from top to bottom, larger to smaller, whole to part, universal to individual, system to fact, one to many, universal to particular, and God to man.

According to Van Til, certain "formal similarities" exist between Christianity and Idealism.<sup>39</sup> For example, theism and idealism are similar in their beliefs that "pluralism destroys the possibility of knowledge," "unity must be basic to difference," and "actuality must be prior to potentiality."<sup>40</sup> Idealism brings us "very close to the Christian position" that God determines all the facts.<sup>41</sup> Idealism correctly posits that "a fact not set into. . . a system of relationships is wholly empty of intelligible communicative content."<sup>42</sup> "Every statement about any fact is by implication a statement about reality as a whole."<sup>43</sup>

Whereas the correspondence-theory of empiricism presupposes the ontic priority of brute facts, idealism's "method of implication" rejects this notion of "bare facts" and requires the Absolute as ultimate principle for all rational and meaningful predication.

The error of idealism, however, consists in correlating eternity with time and God with human beings. Such correlation makes human beings "co-laborers" with God and denies that God is the "ultimate interpreter."<sup>44</sup> As the "Concrete Universal" or "Absolute," God is the ontological possibility of all human predication. His existence is always *presupposed* and can never be proven. Van Til writes,

For Descartes' formula, 'think, therefore I am,' we now substitute, 'God thinks, therefore I am.' The actuality of God's existence is the presupposition of the intelligibility of the concepts of possibility and probability.<sup>45</sup>

The ultimate environment for human beings and absolute category for interpretation is always the sovereign and self-attesting God of the Scriptures, i.e., the "All-Conditioner," "All-Conscious One," "Great Orderer who is Back of Everything," "self-contained Rational Deity," and "Ontological Trinity."

As His covenant-creature, a finite human being is God's "derivative re-knower," i.e., someone

who replicates or re-interprets, in analogical fashion, on a creaturely level what God has already *pre*-interpreted on another level. Because of this analogical structure of created reality, human self-consciousness is “inherently revelational” and as “ectype” approximates the ultimate “Archetype.”

In Reformed fashion, Van Til stressed the unity of all revelation, acknowledged the revelational character of created reality, recognized the religious conflict between covenantkeeping and covenant-breaking, sensed the danger of individualism, and ascribed to Jesus Christ a central place in his view of reality.

Several elements in Van Til’s philosophical approach to apologetics and theology are questionable, however. Further study is needed of his adherence to Augustine’s view of ontological trinity and implied analogical structure of reality and knowledge, his underlying agreement with Princeton’s stress on rational anthropology and use of inextant infallible autographa, and his acceptance in his apologetic endeavors of idealism’s logic of relations and placing of particular entities in the context of the all-encompassing Ultimate.

### Conclusion

This brief historical survey indicates that basic assumptions of leading thinkers in Presbyterian higher education were directly based on rationalistic principles of either Scottish common sense philosophy or, in critique of this realism, the philosophy of British Idealism.

That theology is contextual even for Presbyterian thinkers who so vigorously advocated the universality and objectivity of their way of thinking, is undeniable. To recognize this fact reveals the culturally conditioned character of traditional North American Presbyterian theology. Despite its good intentions, this theological tradition based its relentless quest for certainty to a large extent on questionable philosophical assumptions.

To the extent this historically significant tradition of theology harmonized biblical revelation with basic tenets of Scottish realism, it reflected more Scotto-American culture than biblical reality. Notwithstanding its fear of relativism, it contributed to a *de facto* relativizing of human nature, of the source of reliability, of the character of truth, and of the power of the gospel.

### Notes

- 1 Some ten years ago, a gifted theologian wrote me: “. . . Reformed people whose roots are in the continent of Europe—especially, the Christian Reformed Church—have a different way of ‘doing’ theology than do the conservative Presbyterians in North America. Initially, I was not as aware of that as I perhaps should have been—I did not grow up in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church or any other Reformed denomination. . . . As I served in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, however, I became increasingly aware of those differences. . . . I became aware that my own perspectives, as developed during my exposure to the Christian Reformed Church, were quite a bit different than those of [Westminster] Seminary.”
- 2 Reid’s *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*. Introduced by Baruch Brody. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969; *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. Introduced by Baruch Brody. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969; and *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*. Edited and introduced by Timothy Duggan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. For a helpful study of Reid’s views, see *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations*, Stephen F. Barker and Tom L. Beauchamp, eds. A Philosophical monograph. Philadelphia: University City Science Center, 1977.
- 3 For details, see Daniel F. Rice, “Natural Theology and the Scottish Philosophy in the Thought of Thomas Chalmers” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 24 (1971), 23-46.
- 4 As quoted by W. W. Witte, “John Witherspoon: An Exposition and Interpretation.” (Th.D. Thesis. Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953), 79.
- 5 “John Witherspoon and His Times.” (Princeton, 1890), 14.
- 6 *Philosophy and Reality. Should It Be Favored By America?* New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1894. 5.
- 7 “Philosophy of Reality” in Daniel Sommer Robinson, *The Story of Scottish Philosophy. A Compendium of Selections from the Writings of Nine Prominent Scottish Philosophers. With Biographical Essays*. New York: Exposition Press, 1961. 279.
- 8 For details about the role and views of McCosh, see the penetrating study by J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition: From Glasgow to Princeton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- 9 John O. Nelson, “The Rise of Princeton Theology. A Genetic Study of American Presbyterianism until 1850” (Ph.D. Thesis. Yale University, 1935), 15; also 20 and 32.
- 10 Alexander had all his students transcribe Witherspoon’s Lectures on Moral Philosophy and Criticism. He believed that the truths of Scripture were essentially intellectual. For details, see James Waddell Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D. D.* New York, 1894, esp. 23, 46, 83, 107, 465, and 583.
- 11 Sidney E. Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology” in *Church History* 24 (1955), 266. Alexander sensed and appreciated the strong influence of common sense philosophy upon the views of Thomas Chalmers. Cf. “The Works of Thomas Chalmers” in *The Biblical Repertory*, XIII (1841), 30-54.
- 12 *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian

- Board of Publications, 1836. 62-63; see also 81-88.
- 13 *Evidences*, 88.
- 14 *Evidences*, 77.
- 15 *Evidences*, 229. Alexander criticized a certain Daniel Wilson for not applying inspiration also to seemingly small matters. Cf. "The Evidences of Christianity. . . by Daniel Wilson" in *The Biblical Repertory*, II (1831), 146-150.
- 16 *Evidences*, 230.
- 17 *Evidences*, 307.
- 18 For a detailed discussion of the importance of these philosophical assumptions for miraculous, authoritarian, and propositional revelation, see J. A. Montsma, *De Exterritoriale Openbaringsopvatting achter de fundamentalistische Schriftbeschouwing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), especially regarding C. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, 176-210. Two other significant publications in this connection are Mark A. Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921. Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *Facing the Enlightenment and Pietism: Archibald Alexander and the Founding of Princeton Theological Seminary* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983. Another helpful study is the mimeograph "The Development of Calvinism in North America on the Background of its Development in Europe," A Speech delivered by H. Evan Runner (of Calvin College, Grand Rapids) in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, November, 1957.
- 19 Ned B. Stonehouse, ed., *What is Christianity? and Other Addresses* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1951. 229. Also George M. Marsden, "J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth" in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XLII, (Fall, 1979), 157-175.
- 20 *What is Faith?* New York: McMillan, 1933, 130.
- 21 *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*. New York: McMillan, 1936, 57.
- 22 As quoted by D. M. Roark, "Authority in Protestantism: 1890-1930" in *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 22 (1965-1966), 17.
- 23 *The Christian View of Man*. New York: McMillan 1937. 44.
- 24 *What is Christianity?*, 227.
- 25 "Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy" in *The Princeton Theological Review*, XXIV (1926), 66.
- 26 For details, see C. Allyn Russell, "J. Gresham Machen, Scholarly Fundamentalist" in *The Journal of Presbyterian History*, 51 (1973), 41-69.
- 27 Cf. George M. Marsden, "The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism" in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXII (1969), 132-134. For further details, see Paul Woolley, *The Significance of J. Gresham Machen Today*, Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977, especially. "Civil Liberties," 19-20. This libertarian bent in Machen may have contributed to the split at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1929 and the schism in the Presbyterian Church in 1936.
- 28 *The Imposition of Method: A Study of Descartes and Locke*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. 231.
- 29 Regarding the role of Francis Bacon in this connection, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science. The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977. For a revision in writing the history of North American philosophy, see Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphy, *A History of Philosophy in America*, Vol. I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), xiv and 215-273. For further information, see Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America, 1800-1860*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978; E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978); Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978); and Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 1978.
- 30 These textbooks simplified not only Smith's theory of economics but also this morality—cf. Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, 349. Adam Smith (1723-1790) taught Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow from 1752 to 1764. He believed that revealed religion is a reasonable extension of natural religion, that within each person's conscience resides the highest tribunal for virtue, and that political economics is based on the principles of laissez-faire capitalism. His *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) was the first source for his classic *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).
- 31 For information about this movement, especially its implications for scholarship and various concrete issues in life, see Gary North, ed. *Foundations of Christian Scholarship. Essays in the Van Til Perspective*. Vallecito, CA.: Ross House Books, 1976. Similar philosophical assumptions are operative also in the relatively recentonomy movement, developed in the shadow of Westminster Theological Seminary and under the conservative leadership of such persons as R. Rushdoony, G. North, G. Bahnsen, and others associated with Chalcedon in California.
- 32 Personal interview with C. Van Til, July 12, 1973.
- 33 Van Til referred to this position, found in both C. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, as a form of "less consistent Calvinism." Cf. *Apologetics*. Syllabus. Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1963, 36 and 45.
- 34 "The Defense of the Faith," Vol. II of *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*. Syllabus. Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1969, 11.
- 35 *The Defense of the Faith*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972, 181.
- 36 Personal interview with C. Van Til, June 20, 1973.
- 37 Personal letter, December 13, 1968. "I have been drenched in Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck," and personal interview, July 3, 1973.
- 38 Edited by Norman Kemp Smith. London, 1938. Van Til donated his personal copy of Bowman's work to the library of Dordt College.
- 39 Van Til's manuscript of *Toward a Reformed Apologetics*, and Personal Interview, June 23, 1973.
- 40 *Christianity and Idealism*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955. 19.
- 41 "Christian Theistic Evidences." Syllabus. Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961. 45. For God, who is "the Ultimate Category of interpretation," fact and interpretation are coextensive.

- 42 "Revelation and Scientific Effort," an address given to the Calvin College Alumni of the Chicago Area, March 27, 1953, in *Miscellaneous Addresses and Book Reviews*. A mimeograph, Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1964. 11.
- 43 "Christian Theistic Evidences," 11. "Generally speaking, we may say that we have been greatly influenced by the British Hegelianism of such men as Thomas Hill Green, Francis Herbert Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, J. Edward Caird, Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, and James Ward." Cf. *Christianity and Idealism*, 43. Regarding the impact of idealism,

see Clarence Bouma, "Hegelianism and Theism" in *Princeton Theological Review*, XXV (April, 1927), 200-214, and regarding the role of monistic thinking, see D. C. Phillips, "Organicism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* XXXI (1970), 413-432. For general information about Van Til's work, see William White, Jr., *Van Til—Defender of the Faith*. Nashville and New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979.

44 *Theistic Evidences*, 43.

45 *Theistic Evidences*, 45.