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From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace

Abstract

What Cornelius Van Til calls the "common grace problem" has received considerable attention in the theological discussions of, especially, the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with an exhaustive (three volume) attempt by Abraham Kuyper to interpret all the implications of this doctrine for the individual and for society and through the various refinements of the Amsterdam School to the suggested overhaul by Cornelius Van Til, the doctrine remains an unsettled one upon which there is no mutual agreement.

Keywords

Cornelius Van Til, Abraham Kuyper, grace, reformed theology

Disciplines

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FROM CONDITION TO STATE:
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON
CORNELIUS VAN TIL'S DOCTRINE OF COMMON GRACE

JAN VAN VLIET

I. Introduction

What Cornelius Van Til calls the "common grace problem" has received considerable attention in the theological discussions of, especially, the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Beginning with an exhaustive (three volume) attempt by Abraham Kuyper to interpret all the implications of this doctrine for the individual and for society and through the various refinements of the Amsterdam School to the suggested overhaul by Cornelius Van Til, the doctrine remains an unsettled one upon which there is no mutual agreement.² Opposition by theologians such as Herman Hoeksema

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¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 1.

² Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d. [1945]); by the designation "Amsterdam School," I mean the dogmaticians Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck and Valentine Hepp, who, respectively, held the chair of dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam for the period 1879-1950. Their position is also referred to as the "traditional" view. Each of these three theologians had a distinctive philosophical/theological bias: Kuyper was more speculative, Bavinck was more biblical-historical while Hepp was the most scholastic of the three (Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* [Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1988], 81, 89-90, 280, 374-75). Some of these biases have surfaced in their respective contributions to the doctrinal development of common grace, or to what Cornelius Van Til calls the "common grace problem." In his penetrating sweep, Van Til exposes the weaknesses of each of these three dogmaticians. G. C. Berkhouwer, appointed to dogmatics in 1945, also was involved in common grace discussions but to a lesser degree.

Calvin himself identified two grace genera. See especially John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.2.17, n. 63. Herman Kuiper has documented Calvin's teaching on common grace from an exhaustive survey of the entire Calvinian corpus (*Calvin on Common Grace* [Grand Rapids: Smitter, 1928]). Discussion of the doctrine took place in both American and Dutch theological milieus. It was in the latter, however, that the "common grace problem" was raised to a high level of theological conflict, conflict that resulted in denominational schism. It is unclear why this became a primarily Dutch Reformed debate. I suspect it has to do with the neo-Calvinistic teaching of Abraham Kuyper, his emphasis on the antithesis and the logical question that arises with such antithetical emphasis: how to account for the beneficence of God bestowed equally upon the elect

and Klaas Schilder who, respectively, strenuously denied any notion of common grace and actively sought to reconstruct it, still remains strong though in more muted form.

Van Til's entry into the debate marked a significant shift in the understanding of this doctrine. He attempted to apply presuppositional apologetics to the understanding and nuancing of the concept of common grace. Van Til's contribution was unique in that it resulted from his positioning the doctrine within a comprehensive presuppositional philosophy of history. In accounting for the many facts of history as being determined by, defined by, and following one pattern, Van Til saw the biblical doctrine of the self-contained ontological Trinity as a unique solution to what he called "the perplexing *One and Many* problem."³ Only in light of the ontological Trinity does history have any meaning. The (Kierkegaardian) Moment can have significance only "upon the presupposition of the biblical doctrine of the ontological trinity."⁴ As Van Til explains:

In the ontological trinity, there is complete harmony between an equally ultimate one and many. The persons of the trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another and of God's nature. It is the absolute equality in point of ultimacy that requires all the emphasis we can give it. Involved in this absolute equality is complete interdependence; God is our concrete universal.⁵

Van Til held that history makes sense or has meaning only with the concrete universal in back of time as the interpretative grid. And only by knitting the thread of common grace through this philosophical tapestry could the question of what is common between believer and unbeliever be addressed at all. This is the common ground which justifies the universal offer of the gospel within the reality of God's predestinating grace. Van Til was able to do this with the Christian notion of a limiting concept.⁶

and reprobate? Some suggest Kuyper was also seeking theological underpinnings for his program of Christian social action (Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959], 117-36 and 229-45).

³ In distinction from the economic Trinity which emphasizes the relational and functional interrelationships of the three-in-one (Van Til, *Common Grace*, 2, 8).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ Two problems associated with a Christian philosophy of history which assumes God as the concrete universal are those of paradox and the limiting concept. Because the ontological Trinity is incomprehensible, argues Van Til, Christians should embrace the "apparently contradictory" and eschew all efforts to "present the Christian position as rationally explicable in the sense of being comprehensible to the mind of man." Related to this, says Van Til, the Christian must realize that all points of doctrine are to be understood in light of all other points of doctrine. They are interrelated and interdependent. Thus, any one point of doctrine, as *such*, is itself a "limiting concept." Van Til's definition is significantly different from that of Immanuel Kant for whom the "limiting concept" is that concept of the Absolute (it could be a god) in the noumenal realm (itself a limiting concept) to which humanity can aspire. It is called limiting in the sense that it describes the limitedness of humanity's experience, the non-Christian notion of the limiting concept as based upon the non-Christian conception of

Van Til's development of this doctrine thus marked a sea change in the understanding of common grace. But this development is not without its problems. Van Til himself acknowledged that the "practical difficulties will always be great enough. We realize too, that theoretically, the question is exceedingly complicated."⁷ What follows is critical reflection on the practical and theoretical difficulties attending Van Til's understanding of common grace. Perhaps Van Til would have welcomed such reflection because he conceded that "we have a long way to go. But the direction in which we ought to work is, in our humble opinion, reasonably clear."⁸ For Van Til that direction was "Christ-centered" and "biblically-constructed" and so this paper follows where Van Til pointed.⁹

II. *The 1924 Christian Reformed Church Synodical Declaration on Common Grace*

At the synodical meeting of 1924 in Kalamazoo, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was forced to adjudicate between the traditional view on common grace and the challenge mounted by CRC ministers Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof who claimed that to affirm the doctrine of common grace was to deny the doctrine of total depravity. On the recommendation of the synodical committee assigned to the study of the "common grace problem" and quoting liberally from Scripture, the *Belgic Confession*, the *Canons of Dort*, John Calvin, the *Nadere Reformatie* Divine Petrus van Mاسترict, and Zacharias Ursinus (co-drafter of the *Heidelberg Catechism*), Synod upheld the view of Kuyper et al., and taught a three-dimensional understanding of common grace:

Concerning the first point, touching *the favorable attitude of God toward mankind in general, and not alone toward the elect*, Synod declares that it is certain, according to Scripture and the Confession, that there is, besides the saving grace of God, shown only to those chosen to eternal life, also a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to his creatures in general. . . .

Concerning the second point, touching the restraint of sin in the life of the individual and in society, the Synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confession there is such a restraint of sin. . . . God through the general operations of His Spirit, without renewing the heart, restrains sin in its unhindered breaking forth, as a result of which human society has remained possible. . . .

Concerning the third point, touching *the performance of so-called civic righteousness by the unregenerate*, the Synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confession the unregenerate, though incapable of any saving good, . . . can perform

history. By Van Til's definition, on the other hand, theological doctrines, creeds, etc., are limiting concepts, "'approximations' to the fulness [*sic*] of truth as it is in God." *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

such civic good. . . . God, without renewing the heart, exercises such influences upon man that he is enabled to perform civic good.¹⁰

In response to Synod's declaration, Hoeksema retreated into the safe haven of a Reformed denomination more congenial to his position. The CRC's formulation was also important for Van Til's understanding of common grace. But his formal construction, by building directly on Kuyper, departed significantly from Synod's declaration with serious theoretical and practical consequences for the doctrine.

III. *Abraham Kuyper and Common Grace*

Because Cornelius Van Til sought to correct and develop further the traditional view on common grace, some familiarity with Kuyper's position and Van Til's interaction with it is necessary.¹¹

The believer holds that scientific investigation is conducted on either Christian or non-Christian presuppositions. On this everyone is in agreement. Scientific investigation should proceed in full consciousness of the point of departure: the self-contained ontological Trinity. But Kuyper's distinction between the natural and spiritual sciences in scientific investigation, according to Van Til, compromises the God-referent starting-point and sends Kuyper's system into the same direction as the Scholastics. While Van Til concedes the validity of this distinction, it is Kuyper's use of it with which Van Til takes exception. Kuyper's thinking, argues Van Til, has been seriously impaired with Kantian influence, for he allows an area of investigation (within these distinctions) of the thing *as such*, within each respective field. Whereas the physical (or lower) sciences, deal with the perceivable (*ponderabilia*), the spiritual (or higher) sciences deal with "intangibles." To capture Van Til's contention with Kuyper accurately on this very fundamental and significant point, we quote him at length. Van Til protests from his reading of Kuyper's *Encyclopaedie* that:

[he] seems to use these distinctions for the defense of his contention that there is an area of interpretation where the difference between those who build, and those who do not build, on the fact of regeneration, need not, and cannot, be made to count. . . . Kuyper shows how, because of the fact of regeneration, there must be a twofold development of science. Yet this twofold development could not, in the past, be clearly marked if for no other reason than that there "is a very broad territory where the differences between the two groups has [*sic*] no significance" (*ibid.*, 104). As a reason for this, Kuyper offers the fact that regeneration does not change our senses nor the appearance of the world around us. He therefore feels justified in concluding that the whole area of the more primitive observation, which limits itself to measuring, weighing, and counting is common to both. . . .

¹⁰ *The Banner* (June 1, 1939), 508 f., cited in Van Til, *Common Grace*, 19-22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14-18, 34-44. See also Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vols. 1 and 2; and *id.*, *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (3 vols.; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 2.52-2.132.

"Whether something weighs two or three milligrams, may be absolutely determined by any one able to weigh" (ibid., 105). . . . "At the beginning of scientific interpretation in the natural sciences, there is a common territory where the difference in starting-point and standpoint does not count" (ibid., 106).¹²

Kuyper acknowledges that it is here and only here, at the starting point, that there is no methodological dispute in interpretation of the phenomena in the natural sciences. This represents the area of common territory between the believer and the unbeliever in epistemological investigation. And in the lower aspect of the spiritual sciences as in logic, there is no epistemological difference between the believer and the unbeliever. Thus, in Kuyper's taxonomy, there are three territories in which both believing and unbelieving interpreters of observable fact can have formal interaction: all natural (lower) sciences, the lower spiritual sciences and logic. For in these areas, says Kuyper, "'at the beginning of the road, the tree of science is common to all' (ibid., 116)."¹³

Van Til asserts that Kuyper allows for commonness in these territories because he does not see them as being metaphysically altered by sin. For Kuyper, "where sin has not changed the metaphysical situation, the difference between believer and unbeliever need not be brought to the fore."¹⁴ And this is Kuyper's *faux pas*. For it is because of total depravity that no sinner is God-referent in self-interpretation and in interpretation of the universe. To concede one iota of commonness, is to concede the whole. "Any area of commonness, that is, any area of commonness without qualification however small, is a justification for larger areas of commonness, till at last there is but one common area."¹⁵ To give up one acre is to give up the farm.

It is for this reason that Van Til charges Kuyper with being inconsistent, for the antithesis cannot be maintained with a Kuyperian understanding of common territory. In fact, argues Van Til, maintenance of the antithesis allows for even greater areas of cooperation because it is a conditional, a qualified, cooperation, one we might call, as Van Til puts it, an "as if" type of cooperation. In other words, metaphysical commonness is the only but sufficient common ground that exists between the believer and unbeliever. And on this basis these two groups of interpreters, Christian and non-Christian, can legitimately cooperate. They can cooperate only *as if* they are on common ground.¹⁶

¹² Van Til, *Common Grace*, 41-42.

¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Van Til betrays some ambiguity here. Because the only "point of contact" or the common ground between believers and unbelievers is, for Van Til, the common metaphysical consciousness, I am arguing that it is this commonness which allows for epistemological cooperation in the field of scientific investigation. Thus, it is an "as if" type of cooperation. If metaphysical commonness allows for cooperation in all endeavor, then, of course, the field is

Before we consider Van Til's response to the common grace teaching of the Amsterdam School, some broad observations are in order. It should be clear from the foregoing that the Amsterdam paradigm was constructed upon a "spatial" understanding of common grace. Common grace was seen to operate, to function, in the realm of "territory." To the question "What do entities which will one day be wholly different from one another have in common before that final stage of separation is reached?" Amsterdam has developed an answer constructed on a spatial paradigm.¹⁷

Van Til rightly exposes Amsterdam's spatial paradigm as conceding too much to irrationalism because, by presupposing commonality in territories of knowledge, the existence of brute fact is acknowledged, i.e., bare, uninterpreted facts of reality and knowledge, over which the creature has final interpretative power. By presupposing this existence, Amsterdam has practically conceded unmitigated autonomy to the creature. To do this, says Van Til, is to descend into the same epistemological black hole into which all non-presuppositional systems ultimately disappear. This is the obvious problem of the Romanist system, developed, as it is, on Thomas' thinking. This is the problem with the Butler School as well; the best this school can do is come up with a probabilistic God who is not the God of Christian theism.

unlimited, or, as Van Til states, "a larger 'common' territory than Kuyper allows for." For it is only thus—through metaphysical commonness—that a larger territory is made common. In any event, Van Til does not want to define common grace in terms of "territory." This is the motivation for his new paradigm which I develop below.

An attempt at any other interpretation of Van Til's point of "larger common territory" would land us in the critical camp of James Daane who mounts a scathing assault on Van Til's work and concludes that Van Til's doctrine of common grace is inimical to the gospel. Daane dismisses Van Til's notion of "as if" and much else of Van Til's thinking, as betraying the "existential dialectical quality of his thought." Among other things that Daane charges Van Til with is his charge that "such as-if cooperation conceals the religious difference and infringes on the nature of Christian witness." And commonality between believer and unbeliever is pure abstraction because, says Daane, Van Til holds that "commonality—on which all cooperation rests—is real only when and insofar as the elect and reprobate do not yet exist. The as-if of Christian cooperation therefore is correlative with this unreal as-if commonality of non-existence. . . . Men have things in common because they do not yet exist. Commonality is the basis for cooperation. Christians may therefore cooperate with unbelievers to the extent that they do not yet exist. Just as God extends common grace to mankind in so far as it does not yet exist, so Christians may extend the spirit of cooperation to unbelieving mankind in so far as it does not yet exist." Cooperation is based not on any commonality between Christians and non-Christians, says Daane interpreting Van Til, but only because the non-Christian is not yet "fully himself. He is still—with the Christian—in the throes of non-existence." Daane concludes that "if it is only a commonality in non-existence which the believer and the unbeliever have in common, and therefore a mere as-if commonality, is it not unethical for the believer to cooperate with the non-believer as though they had something in common in the field of religion?" Daane says much more but I can summarize his critique of Van Til here by saying that for Daane, Van Til's notion of "as if" cooperation surreptitiously conceals the religious difference between believer and non-believer and also, as I quoted above, "infringes on the nature of Christian witness" (*A Theology of Grace* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 156-58).

¹⁷ Van Til, *Common Grace*, 68.

The spatial paradigm is intuitively appealing, especially when applied to the lower territories. In this area (the physical sciences, the lower spiritual sciences and logic), investigation proceeds at low levels of epistemological self-consciousness. This is true in mathematics, for example. Mathematical investigation proceeds in an epistemological un-self-conscious fashion. Two mathematicians, a believer and a non-believer, are both able to arrive at the same (and correct) solution to mathematical inquiry without needing to self-consciously accept or reject the self-contained ontological Trinity in back of all facts. This is Kuyper's contention. The point Van Til makes, however, is that rejection is precisely what does happen; the non-believing mathematician believes he is dealing with brute fact while the believing mathematician knows that the facts are already constructively interpreted by the ontological Trinity and are only being re-interpreted re-constructively through his mathematical investigation. The non-believer, in reaching the conclusion that one plus one equals two, has rejected God in the meantime, if un-self-consciously. The believer has reached the same mathematical conclusion, epistemologically un-self-consciously presupposing an altogether different (and to the non-believer, antagonistic) world- and life-view. The opportunity to cooperate resides in the reality that investigation in these lower territories proceeds at low or non-existent levels of epistemological self-consciousness. And this result obtains with respect to the three areas of investigation—physical sciences, lower spiritual sciences and logic—identified by Kuyper as the "lower territories." It is in these areas that common grace is most profuse, requiring, as they do, no epistemological self-conscious investigation and ratiocination by both believer and non-believer. As such, here occur the opportunities for the Christian witness.

The opposite is the case with "higher territories." Religious investigation, for example, proceeds at high levels of epistemological self-consciousness. This is obviously necessitated by the subject matter and the nature of the investigation. One discusses spirituality and God by being either God-referent or creature-referent. The common ground for common grace to operate has narrowed significantly. There is minimal room for cooperation because of the lack of commonness. This spatial paradigm of the Amsterdam School is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1 on the following page.

It is clear that for this spatial paradigm to work as Kuyper developed it, one must presuppose both brute fact and creature-referent epistemology, conceding significantly more than metaphysical common ground to the non-believer. For Amsterdam's system was prepared to concede *epistemological* common ground. This was of course considered anathema to the presuppositional approach of Cornelius Van Til. For fundamental to Van Til's apologetic position is the presupposition of the self-contained ontological Trinity as interpreter of fact through whom the creature receives interpretation. Humanity is always and everywhere, in all "territories," a reconstructive reinterpreter. It is only by way of metaphysical common ground that the believer and the non-believer are enabled to investigate the territories of knowledge. Using the 1924 Kalamazoo Synodical declaration

as his foundation, then, and a comprehensive philosophy of history as his framework, Cornelius Van Til set out to redevelop Abraham Kuyper's common grace doctrine.

Figure 1
Common Grace: The Spatial Paradigm of the Amsterdam School

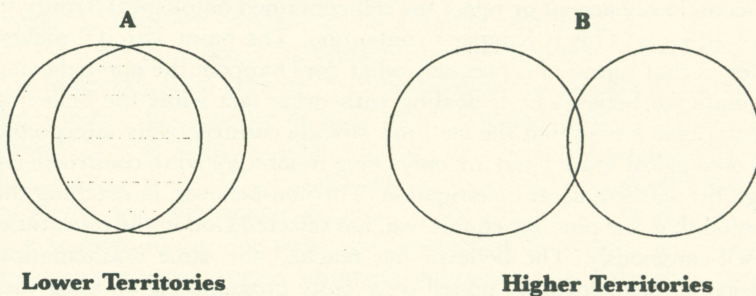


Figure 1A represents the "lower" territories of epistemological investigation such as the physical sciences, the lower spiritual sciences and logic. Each circle represents the study of a lower territory by believer and non-believer respectively. These two radically different groups of investigators can operate in these lower areas of knowledge in a cooperative fashion because of the large common area indicated by the overlapping area of the two circles. This overlap occurs because these areas of knowledge can be investigated with little self-conscious reflection as to the source and interpretation of the facts of knowledge by each group. There is, in other words, much common ground, a large field of commonness between believer and non-believer because the investigation proceeds at low degrees of epistemological self-consciousness. The field of commonness represents a wide area for the operation of common grace.

Figure 1B depicts the "higher" territories, the spiritual sciences. Dialogue between believers and non-believers in, say, religion, proceeds with a very high degree of epistemological self-consciousness because rejection or acceptance of the Christian God is itself a proposition very central to the dialogue. There is, as a consequence, very little commonness, very little area of common ground as indicated by the area of overlap of the two circles; this leaves only a small field of operation for common grace. Although this is not made explicit by either Kuyper or Van Til, we might say that in the higher territories we are already working in the field of special grace, where outright acceptance or denial is most obvious.

IV. *The Temporal Paradigm of Cornelius Van Til*¹⁸

1. *Organizing Assumptions and a Philosophy of History*

We must understand the doctrine of common grace in terms of an overall philosophy of history, asserts Van Til. A historical approach necessarily

¹⁸ Ibid., 64-95.

introduces the element of time into the investigation. Van Til thus introduces what we shall designate the "temporal paradigm." Only such a model will remedy the abstract thinking to which the spatial paradigm inevitably leads.

Van Til made several key assumptions in the development of his paradigm. First is his by now well-known persuasion that the self-contained ontological Trinity (SCOT) is our interpretative concept, our concrete universal in whom are comprehended all facts, in whom thought and being are coterminous. Second, and related to the first, the common grace model is anchored in a philosophy of history given meaning by the reality that both facts and universals have a common dependence on SCOT. This correlativity between facts and universals (the problem of the one and many solved by the trinitarian nature of SCOT) facilitates historical progress, giving the moment significance.¹⁹ Finally, and flowing from assumptions one and two above, the only common ground between believer and non-believer is a common metaphysical consciousness. And, if the antithesis is to be maintained, there can be no other source of common ground within which common grace operates. There is spiritual, epistemological and psychological differentiation.

In shifting to a temporal paradigm within which to develop his doctrine of common grace, it is not surprising to hear Van Til express concern about the historical and its meaning. What is the meaning of the historical? "To what extent should we allow our notion of the earlier to be controlled by our notion of the later? We think that the notion of the earlier must be stressed more than has been done heretofore."²⁰ What is Van Til's meaning here?²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 64.

²⁰ Ibid., 72.

²¹ Daane's critique of Van Til at this juncture is notable. To accept Daane's understanding of "earlier" and "later" would vitiate anything I say in this section. Indeed, Daane argues that Van Til, in fact, is a denier of common grace because for Van Til, says Daane, all common grace is "earlier," before the creature comes into existence. With this Daane places Van Til in the "non-common-grace camp" of Herman Hoeksema.

Daane obtains much mileage in advancing his case from Van Til's frequent ambiguity of language, and in this sense Van Til invites the sort of criticism leveled by Daane. But I do not believe that Van Til's often imprecise terminology, nor his application of non-Christian philosophical categories to the Christian predicament, can lead to the conclusions Daane draws; they certainly do not justify Daane's dismissal of Van Til's position as, essentially, heretical. In his brief assessment of Daane's criticism of Van Til, John M. Frame acknowledges that, yes, Van Til was somewhat sloppy but Daane's work is rather "bizarre" and his exegesis of Van Til lacks a "sense of proportion" (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995], 223-25).

To reflect any more on Daane's view here will take me too far afield. But I must summarize that central to Daane's argument is his assertion that Van Til does not mean chronological time in his conceptions of "earlier" and "later." "The quality of *earlier*, which is the characteristic feature of all common grace according to Van Til, is *not a temporal quality*. . . . *It is an earlier that cannot be dated*. . . . Van Til's concept of earlier cannot describe anything

John Frame probably comes closest to the mark in understanding Van Til at this point.²² Seen from the view of the "later," the historian views all of God's dealings with the creature as determined by that creature's foreordained destiny. History is nothing more than a preparation for an individual's predetermined final state. God's favor upon the elect is preparation for their final state of glory. God's dealings with the reprobate is preparation for their final state of condemnation. The truth of this is apparent when one considers God's immutability. An extreme supralapsarian view of history would take the two intertemporal polarities—creation and consummation—and easily come to this emphasis.

Yet it is also true that Scripture speaks of God's beneficent dealings with the non-elect through the favor he showers upon all his creation. And this is Van Til's concern: how to account for this evidence. There are "transitions" in the high points of redemptive history, transitions between wrath and grace, different periods during which divine favor falls upon the non-elect and divine wrath falls upon the elect.²³ God does not change but his

real. . . . For the earlier meaningful moment is not a temporal moment. . . . There is only one thing—if indeed it may be called a thing—which is by its very nature always and only earlier and never later. That thing is: *existence when it does not yet exist*. That which is always earlier but never later is existence defined in existential dialectical terms. When defined existentially, existence is defined as something which progressively and by degrees *comes to be*. . . . The very existence of non-existence, in the existential process of becoming *consists in its earliness*. When it is later than the moment of becoming, it is no longer non-existence but existence. . . . Thus common grace as that which is earlier but not later, is the correlative of non-existence. And because it cannot be later than non-existence, it is not correlative to existence and existent men" (Daane, *Theology of Grace*, 115-16).

Van Til's doctrine of common grace is shot through with the non-Christian philosophical categories within which he operates, asserts Daane. Worse still: "Instead of presenting a purged basis for a Christian philosophy of history and a purified common-grace theology, he has proffered a compound of Hegelian rationalism and modern existentialism in which the rational dialecticism of Hegel is not only retained but enlarged so as to include within itself an existential dialecticism." Furthermore, according to Daane, Van Til repudiates all three points of the 1924 Synod (Daane, *Theology of Grace*, 6).

²² Frame, *Van Til*, 217-20.

²³ In arguing this point, Frame uses a couple of examples to point up more acutely this "transitional" dimension of history. "Scripture also speaks of transitions in history between God's wrath and his grace. All are genuinely lost in Adam, under a "common curse." That wrath of God is genuine wrath, so genuine that only the death of Christ could satisfy it. In Christ, that wrath is genuinely averted, and there is a transition from wrath to grace. Similarly, the wicked are under God's favor in Adam, and in the Fall they go through a transition—in this case from favor to wrath. But that wrath is not wholly unmixed until the Last Judgment, which is their historical transition to unmitigated wrath" (*Van Til*, 218). Although in general I concur with this view, I would not hold to a pre-fall presence of common grace that Frame seems to indicate here. *It is hard to argue for a distinct group of wicked in Adam before the fall, because the fall introduced this group*. Because there were no wicked before the fall (and no differentiation of any sort) it is hard to argue for any notion of pre-fall common grace. I would designate God's pre-fall undifferentiated beneficence a "general grace," grace of a different genus entirely from the common grace under discussion. I shall have more to say about this presently. Moreover, one's lapsarian predisposition can further complicate the issue.

relation to humanity changes as men and women change. The plan of God itself does not change, but "it determines change."²⁴ Thus, God's plan, while unchanging, includes time and change and gives meaning to history precisely because of God's immutable counsel behind it.

A view of history controlled by the "earlier" gives proper account for these historical transitions of grace and wrath. This is Van Til's reason for stressing the "earlier" "more than had been done heretofore"²⁵ according to Frame.

The idea here seems to be, . . . that God is as much concerned with beginnings and middles as with endings, somewhat like a human computer or novelist. God is interested in the whole historical process, not only with the consummation. Therefore, we must affirm that his love for the whole human race at its creation in Adam was a genuine love, that his wrath upon humanity following the Fall was a genuine wrath, that his good gifts to the reprobate in history are a genuine divine favor, and that redemption is a genuine transition in history from wrath to grace.²⁶

A proper blending of the two perspectives—the earlier and the later—says Van Til, prevents one from the mistake of lapsarian extremes: either an extreme supralapsarian view (in which the "later" is emphasized, focusing exclusively on divine election) or an extreme infralapsarian view (in which the "earlier" is stressed with a singular focus on human agency in second and historical causes).²⁷

Although Frame's analysis of Van Til's use of the notion of the "earlier" is a great help in understanding Van Til's philosophy of history and the subsequent construction of his temporal paradigm of common grace, there is yet another very significant focus which we believe Van Til is trying to communicate and which will help explain his emphasis. Recall that Van Til's reason for this volume is to justify the universal offer of the gospel in a fallen world where humanity's destiny is predetermined. What then constitutes the basis for this offer? It is humanity's metaphysical commonality. In solidarity with Adam (who was created in the divine image), all creatures have a metaphysical common ground, an ontological "point of contact." And because the elect and the non-elect commence along an historical path of differentiation with the introduction of the fall into history, all other possible common ground is lost.²⁸ It was this presuppositional development that led to Van Til's main critique of the Amsterdam School which rejected

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 218-19.

²⁵ Van Til, *Common Grace*, 72, cited in Frame, *Van Til*, 219.

²⁶ Frame, *Van Til*, 219.

²⁷ Van Til, *Common Grace*, 146, cited in Frame, *Van Til*, 220.

²⁸ It is important to note that this differentiation commences in history at the fall, although it has always been present in the mind of God. But we are dealing here with a view of history, and as such are constrained to the time continuum in our understanding and development of this notion of differentiation.

epistemological forfeiture as absolute. It was this very problem that gave rise to Van Til's desire to redevelop the common grace doctrine. Only by virtue of humanity's solidarity in Adam does there exist commonness. And this creaturely commonness, upon which is showered a "general" grace or universal favor or felicity before the fall, is the reason for "common grace," as we now understand it, post-fall. Further, this common grace is the vehicle by which God's gift of special grace, the free gospel offer, is delivered.

2. *Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace*

With this philosophy of history before us, we are now in a position to examine closely the development of Van Til's common grace paradigm. To facilitate exegesis and reflection, we quote at length, recognizing that in back of Van Til's model is the CRC's affirmation of the traditional view (largely the Amsterdam School) at the Kalamazoo Synodical declaration of 1924 to which Van Til subscribes.²⁹ Moreover, Van Til's doctrine of common grace subsumes Calvin's teaching in which the universal offer of salvation is made real only to particular elect individuals because in God both the general and particular are coterminous.³⁰

In his development, Van Til sketches the following common-grace contours:

If, then, we think along the lines suggested by Calvin, we may think of the universal offer of salvation as an evidence of common grace. It is evidence of *earlier* rather than of *lower* grace. All common grace is earlier grace. Its commonness lies in its earliness. It pertains not merely to the lower dimensions of life. It pertains to all dimensions, and to these dimensions in the same way at all stages of history. It pertains to all the dimensions of life, but to all these dimensions ever decreasingly as the time of history goes on. At the very first stage of history there is much common grace. There is a common good nature under the common favor of God. But this creation-grace requires response. It cannot remain what it is. It is conditional. Differentiation must set in and does set in. It comes first in the form of a common rejection of God. Yet common grace continues; it is on a "lower" level

²⁹ Although Daane is right when he claims that Van Til never actually formally penned his unqualified agreement, it cannot be argued, as Daane does, that Van Til stridently denied the "three points" of common grace there affirmed (*Theology of Grace*, 153-59). Such formal approbation would indeed have been helpful "for the record," so to speak. But surely the whole thrust of Van Til's development of his doctrine is to vindicate Kalamazoo (contra Hoeksema and Danhof) and to correct Amsterdam.

³⁰ It must be so by the very nature of SCOT which, as I argued above, solves the problem of the one and many, a philosophical morass from which even Plato and Aristotle could not extract themselves. But also Pighius could not reconcile the universal/particular paradox with reason and consequently taught universal salvation as a logical conclusion to the universal offer, not seeing that with a self-contained ontological Trinity there need be, indeed, there is, no paradox, no internal contradiction of a universal offer within a context of particularism and differentiation.

now; it is long-suffering that men may be led to repentance. God still continues to present Himself for what He is, both in nature and in the work of redemption. The differentiation meanwhile proceeds. The elect are, generally speaking, differently conditioned from the non-elect. They are separated into a special people. In the New Testament period they have the influences of Christian surroundings brought to bear upon them. The non-elect are, generally speaking, conditioned in accordance with their desert; most of them never come within earshot of the external call of the gospel and have no Christian influence brought to bear upon them. Thus it becomes increasingly difficult to observe that which is common.

... Common grace will diminish still more in the further course of history. With every conditional act the remaining significance of the conditional is reduced. God allows men to follow the path of their self-chosen rejection of Him more rapidly than ever toward the final consummation. God increases His attitude of wrath upon the reprobate as time goes on, until at the end of time, at the great consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state. On the other hand God increases his attitude of favor upon the elect, until at last, at the consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state. While in this world, though saved and perfect in Christ, they are yet, because of their old nature, under the displeasure of God.³¹

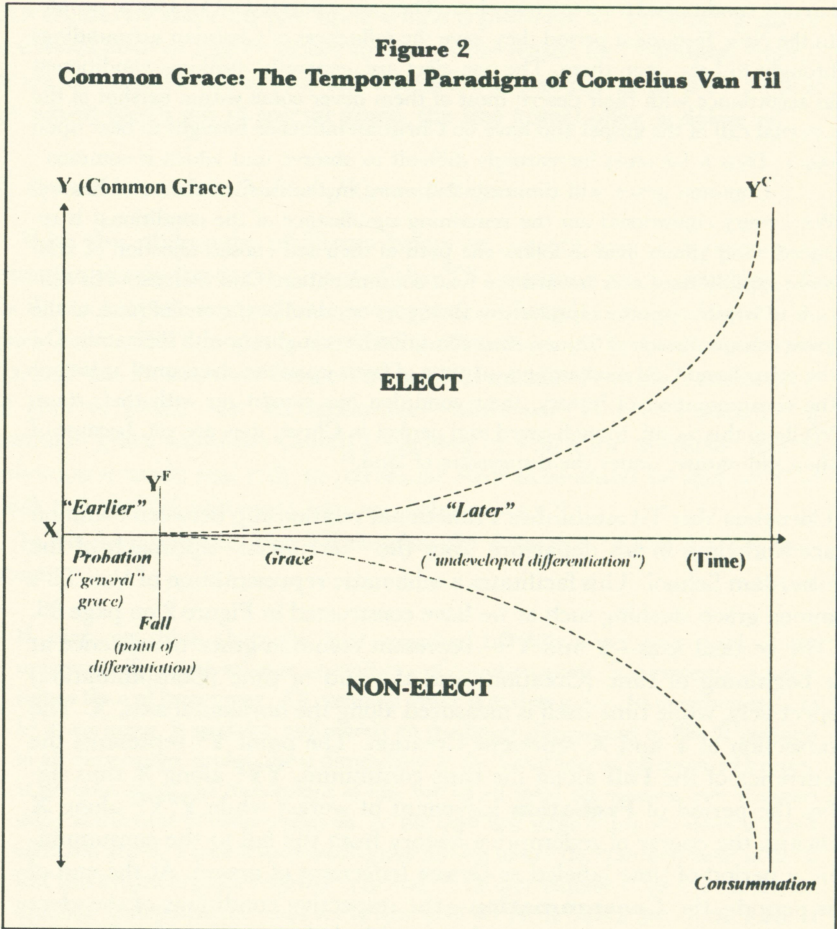
Cornelius Van Til establishes a functional relationship between common grace and time in his departure from the "territorial" approach of the Amsterdam School. This facilitates a schematic representation of Van Til's common grace teaching such as we have constructed in Figure 2 on page 86.

The vertical axes—**Y** and **Y^C**—represent common grace beneficence at the beginning of time (Creation) and the end of time (Consummation) respectively, while time itself is measured along the horizontal axis, **X**. The intersection of **Y** and **X** represent Creation. The point **Y^F** represents the occurrence of the **Fall** along the time continuum. **YY^F** along **X** thus signifies the period of **Probation** (covenant of works) while **Y^FY^C** along **X** indicates the course of redemptive history from the fall to the consummation, a period of time labeled as **Grace** (covenant of grace). At the end of this period—the **Consummation**—the respective conditions of the elect and the non-elect shall have caught up with their (predetermined) states. The upper half of the graph, that area above **X**, we designate the "common grace domain" of the **ELECT**; the lower half below **X** represents the "common grace domain" of the **NON-ELECT** or reprobate. Total depravity coinheres with God's favor or wrath in the conditions of both the elect and the non-elect.

It is the movement along **X** from **Y** to **Y^C** by both elect and non-elect that needs to be stressed in Cornelius Van Til's paradigm. For it is a dynamic model, Van Til's system, in contradistinction from the static paradigm of the Amsterdam School. In the quotation above, Van Til says that all "common grace is earlier grace. Its commonness lies in its earliness." As

³¹ Van Til, *Common Grace*, 82-84.

mentioned above, it is humanity's solidarity in Adam that provides common grace with its warrant.



(1) *Creation to Fall: Undifferentiated Humanity.* In the quotation above, Van Til states that “at the very first stage of history there is much common grace.” Can he be holding to a pre-fall notion of common grace? Such an assertion surely has little intuitive appeal and even less theological justification. Kuyper asserts that common grace “began in Paradise after the Fall.”³² And John Murray was correct to argue that the fall introduced the very

³² Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1902), 2.600; cited in Van Til, *Common Grace*, 16-17. The Kampen edition of *De Gemeene Gratie* cited earlier and that I am using in the present work is paginated somewhat differently. In the absence of the Leiden edition, the reader who wishes to obtain Kuyper's context or read Kuyper in the original language must add about four pages to the page numbers cited by Van Til in his citations.

necessity of common grace.³³ Any grace prior to the fall (and it must be held that all of God's dealings with humanity, even in the pre-fall state, are gracious) was a more general type of beneficence that can hardly be called common grace by our current definition. This pre-fall felicity was of an order entirely different from the post-fall type under consideration when we speak of "common grace." If Van Til wishes to hold to a pre-fall divine beneficence, then he would surely agree that such "common grace" is altogether different from the "common grace" inaugurated at the fall. He says as much when he states that following the fall common grace continues, but now at a "lower level."³⁴ And further on in the quotation above, Van Til talks of "creation-grace" requiring a response. We can safely conclude that by these designations, Van Til clarifies his concept of pre-fall grace and makes a crisp distinction between pre-fall grace and post-fall grace, even if he sometimes uses the designation "common grace" to apply to both the pre-fall and the post-fall state.³⁵

In Figure 2 we have called this pre-fall grace "general" grace to distinguish it from the common grace introduced at **Y^F**. The time period from creation to the fall, the period of probation **YY^F**, is thus that time of general grace common to all humanity as yet undifferentiated. And this general grace, anchored firmly in God's pre-fall beneficence is operative in all "territories," all dimensions of life. Again the notion of "earlier" underscores the dynamic nature of Van Til's paradigm over against the staticism of Abraham Kuyper. And before humanity reaches consummation (**Y^C** along **X**), **Y^F** interposes in history, a "transition" of major proportion. This is the fall and at this stage differentiation sets in, differentiation between the elect and non-elect. As mentioned above, this is represented by **YY^F** along **X**. This is where "earlier" grace is first found. The vertical axis is labeled **Y**, "**Common Grace**," for simplicity only, since, technically, common grace is inaugurated at the fall, not at creation.

Can it be argued from this model that Van Til holds to some form of differentiation prior to the fall? We would answer this in the negative. First, any differentiation prior to the fall is that which obtains between the Creator and the creature. It is to indulge in speculative fantasy to surmise what type of differentiation this would be (for it is certainly a qualitative differentiation) and how this differentiation would advance, if at all, in a pre-fall

³³ John Murray, *Collected Writings, Vol. 2: Select Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 93-119. In his discussion on the nature of common grace, he places God's first evil-restraining activity in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were expelled to prevent further sin (p. 99).

³⁴ Not to be confused with the "lower" territories of the spatial common grace paradigm of the Amsterdam School. This is only one (and not a very good) example where Van Til's loose "multi-purpose" use of identical labels leads to uncertainty in interpretation.

³⁵ In this discussion it should always be remembered that common grace is essentially non-redemptive, qualitatively different altogether from special grace.

state. Secondly, we would rule out any notion of creaturely differentiation prior to the fall. Although Van Til is not always entirely free of hypothetical speculation, we do assert that the overwhelming idea of differentiation as Van Til teaches it in the context of his common grace paradigm is that process of advancing distinction between the elect and the non-elect along the time continuum from the fall to the apocalypse. Thus, the existence of pre-fall Creator-creature differentiation exists but is a concept that is impenetrable at best and speculative at worst; and the existence of creaturely differentiation prior to the fall is not part of Van Til's common grace model.

(2) *Fall to Consummation: A Condition in Pursuit of a State.* Upon rejection of God at the fall, i.e., a negative response to "creation-grace," differentiation sets in. This is at point **XY^F** in Figure 2. The elect and non-elect are "differently conditioned," separated into a people of God and a people of Satan. With the passage of time, says Van Til in the quote above, the elect and non-elect have less and less in common as they go their separate ways. They are treated in accordance with their "desert"; for the non-elect this is in accordance with their gospel rejection while for the elect this is in accordance with their acceptance of Jesus Christ. And with respect to the former group, with each rejection of the gospel call, ("with every conditional act") "the remaining significance of the conditional is reduced." To understand this statement, we must recall that each group, says Van Til, is "conditioned in accordance with their desert." This "conditioning" involves the domain of common grace available to each group. With each (negative) response to this common grace munificence, especially as this is evidenced in the gospel offer (i.e., the "conditional"), this common grace domain or beneficence shrinks and subsequent gospel offers sound less frequently and less clarion (i.e., "the remaining significance of the conditional is reduced"). God lifts the restraint upon sin in increasingly greater measure. In such interplay between the non-elect and common grace, the non-elect follow their self-chosen path of destruction to perdition, through a variety of historical transitions, until, finally, their "condition has caught up with their state." At this point they become fully differentiated. To sum up, initial denial of God through rejection of the Savior results in a self-propelling, accelerating, downward spiral in which the non-elect are abandoned to their own devices by increasingly larger withdrawals of common grace. God has "given them over" to themselves, to use the language of Romans 1.

With reference to Figure 2, this dynamic can be seen by imagining the non-elect proceeding along the dashed line in the lower half of the graph (the "domain of grace" of the non-elect) towards **Y^C** in the downward fashion indicated, the rate of descent somehow proportional to the progressive diminution of common grace available to the non-elect. This "later" grace is less common grace. This path approaches **Y^C** asymptotically; it never intersects **Y^C** on the time continuum. This represents high levels of common grace "withdrawal" (sin becoming less restrained) as the sinner experiences

divine abandonment (not unlike the biblical notion of "hardening of heart"). It is at the end of time, at judgment day, that the lower dashed line crosses Y^C , when time has been exchanged for eternity, when the differentiation introduced at the fall (Y^F) is fully "developed," complete and final.

This intertemporal dynamic is worked out in the domain of the elect in a fashion symmetrical to that of the non-elect (upper half of Figure 2).³⁶ God showers ever greater "doses" of common grace upon them, or, from the quote above, he "increases His attitude of favor upon the elect, until at last, at the consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state." The elect proceed along the time continuum, X , commencing at the beginning of the grace period (following the fall, Y^F) at which time there is much common grace showered equally upon the elect and non-elect. As members of this group advance towards Y^C , they are in receipt of increasingly higher degrees of God's favor moving upwards along the dashed line and asymptotically approaching judgment day. At the time predetermined by SCOT, the dashed line will intersect Y^C and the elect will enter glory, fully differentiated.

From this depiction of intertemporal movement in Cornelius Van Til's common grace model it becomes very clear that emphasizing "earlier" history facilitates better understanding of common grace; common grace in "later" history is, for the non-elect, always diminishing.

That Van Til brings little explicit scriptural evidence in support of his understanding of the historical dynamic in humanity's movement from creation to the consummation is not entirely surprising. It remains therefore, to establish scriptural warrant for Van Til's model. Here the emphasis will be on the movement of both sub-groups of the human race towards consummation at Y^C along the dashed line within their respective common grace domains as illustrated in Figure 2.

Does Scripture teach an outpouring of ever-diminishing common grace upon the non-elect? Is this the normative scriptural principle of God's dealings with humanity through the time of grace, the New Testament age?

While it is difficult to establish this as a definitive scriptural principle, there, in fact, appears to be biblical warrant for drawing the opposite conclusion. In fact, the lament of the Old Testament prophet and the psalmist is precisely this: why are God's covenant people, his treasured possession,

³⁶ I am assuming symmetry for purposes of illustration. It could be argued that total depravity introduces asymmetry into the picture since the elect are never as "blessed" as they would be in the absence of total depravity. For total depravity constantly exerts downward force on the dashed line in the common grace domain of the elect while total depravity works hand in glove with the descent of the non-elect as they plummet ever deeper into their sin, God giving them over to themselves. To put it differently, the existence of total depravity ensures that the condition of the non-elect is in greater conformity with their (reprobate) state than is the case with the elect. The condition of the non-elect has less "catching up" to do in moving to Y^C and crossing it.

subject to such persecution—one could say withdrawals of common grace—through history, when the non-elect enjoy such sublimity. This is the burden of Habakkuk; this is also the cry of the psalmist in Ps 73, to mention only one of many, many places. Jesus teaches that his people will suffer in this the church age, the period of grace, the “later” period in Van Til’s model. Indeed, to identify with Christ is to suffer in this world. Peter teaches the same, especially in 1 Pet 4. It was the Apostle Paul’s life story. The teaching of Scripture seems to be that the elect, far from basking in the sunshine and beneficence of God’s limitless common grace, in fact, endure significant trial and pain. For does the Bible not teach that the believer’s joy is the eschatological hope? Without this hope, all indications are that the elect will perish, the battle conceded to Satan and his forces, God, the self-contained ontological Trinity, defeated for ever. Yes, of course there are rays of sunshine in the experience of the elect, but overwhelmingly one’s felicity is delayed, not a present one in the midst of the time of grace. The believer’s experience in the period of grace, the “later” period, is one lived in the tension of the already/not yet. With this scriptural evidence, it is hard to imagine the elect following the upward path tracked by the dashed line in the top half of Figure 2. If it is true that “God increases his attitude of favor upon the elect” then this favor is, for the most part, of little use because invisible and intangible.

Conversely and perhaps more apparent, Scripture teaches that the non-elect will reach the consummation fully responsible for all the limitless graces heaped upon them through history. The Bible does not speak, in a normative way, of reductions in common grace munificence to the non-elect over time. God’s generosity is overflowing; generally speaking, his beneficence is limitless. And it is exactly this divine favor for which the non-elect will be held accountable, for, from those to whom much is given, much will be required. Seen this way, the judgment upon the non-elect shall be all the more severe and that fully justified.³⁷

(3) *A Truncated Model?* In the earlier part of his volume, *Common Grace*, Van Til commends Kuyper for expanding his earlier view of common grace to take in a much broader perspective. In volume one of *De Gemeene Gratie*, Kuyper focused exclusively on common grace understood as the “restraint

³⁷ If common grace is held constant as horizontal movement along X in Figure 2 indicates, it is easy to see that as the non-elect sinks deeper and deeper into sin, common grace actually increases in a *relative* sense. For common grace to be dispensed in such a proportionate way, I could graph another line in the common grace domain of the non-elect, one parallel to the dashed line. This would provide a more accurate measure of a constant “amount” of common grace, an amount that is proportionate to the descent into sin of the reprobate. There are further possibilities for this model, beyond even this advance, but to take my graphical representation of Van Til’s model too much in a mathematical direction may be to stretch its usefulness to abstraction. This is probably as good a place as any to raise the question that has been begged thus far: Is it accurate and useful to talk of “amounts” of common grace? Readers will obviously need to sort this out for themselves, but be advised, Van Til himself sets it up this way!

of the destructive force of sin," or, the "negative" aspect of common grace.³⁸ This he called the "constant" operation of common grace. But in volume two Kuyper places emphasis on God's favorable attitude. Van Til quotes Kuyper:

Yet common grace could not stop at this first and constant operation. Mere maintenance and control affords no answer to the question as to what end the world is to be preserved and why it has passed through a history of ages. If things remain the same why should they remain at all? . . . If life were merely repetition, why should life be continued at all? . . . Accordingly, there is added to this first constant operation of common grace . . . another, wholly different, operation . . . calculated to make human life and the life of the whole world pass through a process and develop itself more fully and richly. . . .³⁹

And this second operation of common grace is "progressive" because "God, with steady progress, equips human life ever more thoroughly against suffering, and internally brings it to richer and fuller development" by engaging humanity as collaborer.⁴⁰ It is this doctrine of common grace that was finessed by Kalamazoo and to which John Murray subscribed when he describes common grace as being not only a restraining force but also a force promoting the "bestowal of good and excitation to good."⁴¹

While commending Kuyper for a broadening of perspective in the development of his common grace doctrine, it would appear that Van Til has himself forgotten this broader perspective in the formulation of his own model. For, with the exception of some very rare intimations of God's general beneficence, Van Til's model focuses exclusively on, in Kuyper's words, the "constant" operation of common grace, abandoning pretty much altogether the "progressive" aspect. Incorporating the "progressive" dimension of common grace into Van Til's model as presented in the earlier, lengthy quote above and as represented graphically in Figure 2 is to vitiate the model entirely.

It is curious that Van Til, writing a quarter of a century later, is prepared to emphasize much more comprehensively the entire common grace field. In a volume devoted to equipping the "modern pastor" with the apologetic tools required for effective gospel ministry and defense, Van Til goes to great lengths, early in the book, to anchor the pastor in Calvin's *Institutes* as the bedrock for Reformed apologetics.⁴² In this lengthy section, essentially a presentation of his presuppositional framework, Van Til includes nine pages on common grace, over half of which are lengthy quotations from the *Institutes*. His focus here is to expose the creature as a suppressor

³⁸ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 1.242, cited in Van Til, *Common Grace*, 16.

³⁹ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 2.601, cited in Van Til, *Common Grace*, 17.

⁴⁰ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 2.602, cited in Van Til, *Common Grace*, 17.

⁴¹ Murray, *Lectures in Theology*, 102.

⁴² Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971).

of truth in spite of God's continual efforts to bring humanity around. Despite being surrounded by the unmistakable evidences of God in general revelation and despite bearing the *imago dei* upon the consciousness, the non-believer persists in denying God and suppressing all truth about him. It is by the superfluous and beneficent showering of common grace that the non-believer should be convinced, for, even while denial continues unmitigated, "the Holy Spirit continues to appeal to men to return to God. And though God may, in punishment for their sin, allow men to fall into ever deeper sin, he never utterly ignores them. He keeps calling men back to himself."⁴³ With the *Institutes* in hand, Van Til comes to the following conclusion, one of immeasurable significance for our present discussion. He says: "The maintenance of the sense of deity within men in spite of their most desperate acts of suppression is coupled with the idea that they continue to receive from God his bountiful [*sic*] gifts. God is not man's Creator without as such also being his bountiful benefactor." The creature ever receives generous dispensations of common grace from the "bountiful benefactor of mankind calling them back to himself."⁴⁴

This more balanced Van Tillian view of common grace demonstrates, very significantly, that common grace provides the broader context for the operation of special grace. God is ever "calling them back to himself." And, significant for the model presented, he does this with great demonstration of common grace, through not only the restraint of sin but, equally important, through his munificent dealings with humanity, both collectively and individually, elect and non-elect alike. To understand common grace in this scripturally holistic fashion is true to both Amsterdam and Kalamazoo, and significantly changes the path of the non-elect in his or her common grace domain of Figure 2. The route marked out by such a balanced view of common grace, in which the entire field is considered, alters demonstrably the intertemporal dynamic of the creature's movement from fall (**YF**) to consummation (**YC**).

If Van Til's model, then, is to be accurate at all, it should be examined only under this more restrictive view of common grace. It is a truncated model. With reference to the common grace domain of the elect in Figure 2, then, believers sitting under the administration of the gospel, fellowshiping with the people of God, communing in mystical union with Christ the head of the Church, basking in the spiritual felicity of the family of God, do indeed grow in grace and receive limitless gracious interpositions by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ They proceed to the right and up the dashed line and approach

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ One could argue that this felicitous picture just described is more characteristic of special than of common grace. True as this may be, this gracious reality is, however, received by the people of God within a common grace context. By this I mean things like religious liberty, freedom of worship, etc.; i.e., those things which enhance the spiritual estate of the child of God.

Y^C asymptotically until time terminates. Here the dashed line crosses **Y^C**, locating them in eternal felicity; their condition has caught up with their state. The non-elect, on the other hand, spurn the advances of the universal gospel call, repeatedly trample the blood of the Lord underfoot, consistently crucify Jesus anew, indulge ever more in sin, until with hearts hardened and consciences seared, God gives them over to themselves and they permanently descend ever deeper into the dark, bottomless pit of utter depravity, apostasy and spiritual darkness. God has let go. In the common grace domain of Figure 2 they follow the path of the dashed line, approach **Y^C** asymptotically until at time's consummation they intersect **Y^C** and are cast forever into outer darkness; their condition has caught up with their state.

What support can be marshaled from Rom 1 for this "restricted" common grace model?⁴⁶ In the early part of the letter, Paul, speaking first to the Gentiles (1:18-32) and then to the Jews (2:1-3:8) concludes that none is righteous (3:9-3:20) and focuses on the universal reign of sin upon which will fall God's wrath and judgment. This is preparatory to the teaching of his primary doctrine—the righteousness of God and that appropriated through faith (3:21-4:25). But it is especially Paul's portrait of the situation in the Gentile world in 1:18-32 that pertains to Van Til's common grace model.

The indictment commences with the invocation of God's wrath upon all those who spurn the knowledge of God in natural revelation, which, as a hallmark of common grace, serves to render all humanity "without excuse." In consciously repudiating this natural revelation and the special revelation to which this should lead,⁴⁷ God's wrath is poured out in successively greater degree: first, people exchange the truth of God for idols—God "hands them over" (vv. 21-24); then, people exchange the truth of God for a lie—God "hands them over" (vv. 25-26a); finally, people exchange natural sexual practices for the unnatural—God "hands them over" (vv. 26b-31).⁴⁸ These are the consequences of suppressing the truth of God.

What does it mean to "hand over?" This phrase is key to understanding the descent along the dashed line in the common grace domain of the non-elect in Figure 2. It clearly refers to God's judicial abandonment of restraint, a withdrawal of divine influence in allowing sin to follow its "natural" course.⁴⁹ An important question in consideration of this down-

⁴⁶ I say "restricted" to distinguish it from the more fully-orbed concept of common grace fleshed out by Kuyper and Kalamazoo.

⁴⁷ To be sure, this might be asking too much from general revelation but this limited knowledge of God should lead, at the very least, to "reverence and gratitude" (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 105, 107).

⁴⁸ Commentators are not agreed on whose situation Paul is depicting here, Gentiles or all humanity. But this is immaterial for my purposes. In Rom 3:9 Paul emphasizes that all people, both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin (Moo, *Romans*, 96-98).

⁴⁹ But some commentators want to argue for a more active role on the part of God in this divine abandonment. On this view, God more deliberately initiates the process. Moo asserts that "God does not simply let the boat go—he gives it a push downstream. Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to

ward slide is the following: Is this "handing over" reformatory (and thus temporary) or is it the "final word" (and thus permanent)? To be sure, in Van Til's model, it is permanent by definition because it is the non-elect as such who are judiciously abandoned. While the text can be interpreted in this fashion, it cannot be sustained that this is true in every case. All "handing over," all divine abandonment, is not necessarily permanent. Is God not a God who hides himself? Is there not an element of divine mystery that enshrouds the revealed will of God? This is why we must presuppose SCOT; mystery inheres in God who alone is self-contained. We would contend that the doctrine of divine abandonment taught here in this passage should be taken as a limiting concept, and cannot be rallied to the defense of Van Til's model because it is not always permanent. Moreover, neither is this a normative description of the destiny of the non-elect. Many non-elect live perfectly upright, if unbelievably, heading blithely for destruction while basking in the comfort of God's common grace. Of note, too, is Paul's "vice list" further in this passage (vv. 29-31). The apostle enumerates all manner of sin which can and does apply to all humanity, believers and non-believers alike. In the present unsanctified state where differentiation is not yet "developed" believers, too, suffer from these vices by virtue of their existing old nature. All are handed over.

This passage in Rom 1:19-32 can be used to provide only qualified support to Van Til's truncated model.⁵⁰ And even then, it must be used with great caution, recognizing the above-mentioned much wider implications of Paul's purpose in this passage. It must be understood that Paul is taking a perspectival approach to sin and the divine reaction, consequences which humanity has called down upon itself since the fall. Paul is describing what entered into creation with the fall. As he glances back through the corridors of redemptive history, he realizes that this outworking is now documentable. The apostle is describing a megapoint in the affairs of humanity that has been reached at the time Paul is writing. The revelation of God's wrath has been revealed (v. 18). Paul is not concerned to point out the chronological evolution of sin in either the history of humanity generally or in the life of the sinner in particular. For Paul, homosexual depravity represents the height, the megapoint, of the outworking of depravity—it is the most extreme form of idolatry. And it is to this idolatry that God hands the creature over. It is not as if these judgments appear suddenly on the horizon of history; Paul is simply pointing out the reality of divine retribution. Paul is not programmatically mapping out a biblical blueprint for the future

the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin" (Moo, *Romans*, 111). John Murray asserts that "while the barely permissive or privative action of God would of itself be judicial retribution . . . there is the positive infliction of handing over to that which is wholly alien to and subversive of the revealed good pleasure of God" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 1.44).

⁵⁰ I appreciate Professor Richard B. Gaffin's helpful insights into this passage.

course of events in the life of unredeemed humanity (collectively or individually) as Van Til's temporal model would suggest. There may be a sequence in sin—"from bad to worse" we would say—but that is not to suggest a continuing downward spiral in the direction of the dashed line to **Y^C** in Figure 2.

We cannot appeal to Romans to confirm that "common grace will diminish still more in the further course of history." Although it would appear to be true that, in Van Til's truncated model, "God allows men to follow the path of their self-chosen rejection of Him more rapidly than ever toward the final consummation," the Romans passage, in and of itself, constitutes insufficient underpinning for validation of Van Til's common grace doctrine.

(4) *Further Thoughts.* Neither must we neglect the eschatological suggestions of Van Til's model. Van Til's depiction of end times does not appear to square with Scripture. As the non-elect reject God, he "allows men to follow the path of their self-chosen rejection of Him more rapidly than ever toward the final consummation . . . until at the end of time, at the great consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state." They cross **Y^C** in Figure 2, something like an automobile crossing the train tracks into the other, "bad" side of town; they now reside on the proverbial "wrong side of the tracks," where all the apostate are consigned. Their condition has caught up with their state. Although this is, admittedly, something of a caricature, the transition in Van Til's model has about it the aura of something less than cataclysmal. When **Y^C** is crossed the condition of the reprobate has merely caught up with their state.

The eschatological plan that Scripture sets before us suggests an "explosive" differentiation at the consummation of time. The apocalyptic language of Matt 24, for example, seems difficult to incorporate within the dynamic of Van Til's common grace model. The end of the age will be more than a shifting into high gear; the non-elect will be transported into an entirely different, unknown realm of awful punishment and inconceivable agony. The revelation of the man of sin, the lawless one (2 Thess 2), will be a cataclysmic event, a frightful harbinger of the parousia which will usher in Christ and his triumphant rule. This is what it means to cross **Y^C**.

Would Cornelius Van Til disagree with this eschatological view? Probably not. His model seems to imply another eschatological dynamic altogether. And not only is this so because his common grace formulation represents an attenuated perspective of the doctrine; but even this truncated common grace model suffers the limitations and uncertainties enumerated above.

Had Van Til accounted for not only what Kuyper called the negative or "constant" aspect of common grace but also the "progressive" or positive aspect and cast this more holistic understanding into the framework of his philosophy of history, then a model more closely approximating scriptural evidence would have been developed. Murray says: "So that viewing God's

government of this world, even from the aspect of his common or non-saving grace, we may say, the earth is full of the glory of the Lord and all peoples see his glory."⁵¹ This is the principal common grace motif. It is this central principle, a summary of Kuyper and Kalamazoo, that the development of any model of common grace should seek to represent. And it is this comprehensive common grace understanding that is absent from Van Til's paradigm.

3. *Some Practical Implications of Van Til's Common Grace Model*

Cornelius Van Til acknowledges that "the practical difficulties will always be great enough" in addressing the common grace question. What does his temporal paradigm have to offer in practical terms? What does it mean for elect/non-elect interaction all of which takes place in "later" history in the scheme of Van Til's model?

The elect are not to cease confronting the non-elect with the claims of the gospel; indeed, this must proceed as if the process of differentiation were not yet completed (which it isn't) by appealing to humanity's metaphysical common ground. Believers are to witness to unbelievers as to "mankind in general."

We are to use this notion as a limiting concept. We are not to forget for a moment that no such thing exists in any pure state. We are therefore to witness to men that in themselves they are enemies of God. . . . And we are to oppose men more definitely to the extent that they become epistemologically more self-conscious. . . . We are to think of non-believers as members of the same mass of humankind in which the process of differentiation has not yet been completed. It is not to the righteous and to the unrighteous as fully differentiated that God gives his rain and sunshine. It is not to unbelievers as those that have with full self-consciousness expressed their unbelief that we are to give our gifts. We are to give our "rain and sunshine" as God gives them, on the basis of the limiting concept, to the as yet undifferentiated or at least not fully differentiated mass of mankind.⁵²

Van Til's temporal paradigm allows for no neutral area of cooperation, and the elect must do all they can to maintain the antithesis, continually and consciously raising the epistemological self-consciousness of the non-elect.⁵³ It is not true to say "God loves sinners but hates their sin." God hates

⁵¹ Murray, *Lectures in Theology*, 112.

⁵² Van Til, *Common Grace*, 84. See above, n. 6 on "limiting concept."

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 84-86; he suggests various ways to do this, all of which underscore the antithesis. He emphasizes the establishment of Christian educational institutions as a major part of a program that would advance the notion of the antithesis for it is epistemological self-consciousness that Kuyper, in his spatial or "territorial" paradigm, suggested as common ground between believer and unbeliever. I have shown that it is precisely this very understanding of commonness that Van Til's doctrine of common grace seeks to correct, indeed, eradicate altogether with his entirely new paradigm.

sinner *as such* and sinners must know this. But within a philosophy of history which stresses the earlier rather than the later, a believer's attitude toward a non-believer exists on the basis that differentiation is not yet total. There is a temporary commonness.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the believer can never know who is elect and who is not. The offer of salvation is made to elect and non-elect alike, to "mankind in general" says Van Til. This is on the basis of commonness that goes back to "earlier" history. It is this that constitutes the warrant for the universal free gospel offer to all men and women, despite their state, predetermined by SCOT. This can only be understood rightly within the dynamic context of a philosophy of history; a static view necessarily concedes epistemological ground where there is none. This is where Van Til's paradigm shift represents a remarkable advance in our common grace theology.

It may be useful to emphasize here that Van Til's development is really a development of something which exists only in the impenetrable mind of God. Only God knows the identity of the elect and the non-elect. Only SCOT knows who has been abandoned to eternal perdition and who is being prepared for divine felicity. And Van Til would certainly concur that, from the creature's perspective, not until one's final breath has been drawn, is one's eternal destiny sealed, is differentiation complete. It is only God's prerogative to give them over; this abandonment does not lie within the purview of men and women, as jealous for the purity of the gospel as they might be. This means that a believer's evangelistic zeal must never flag, for there is always hope despite all appearances to the contrary. Humanity's metaphysical commonness, established in "earlier" time by virtue of the creature's solidarity with Adam constitutes the warrant for the unceasing declaration of the universal gospel offer in this "later" time, through the transitions of personal and world history, but always within an antithetical context.

For this reason one should guard against the apparent tendency in Van Til's model to engender undue pessimism in apologetic and evangelistic efforts. With Van Til's model in hand, it is too easy to consign the "perceived" non-elect to what, in the mind of the believer, appears to be the eternal state to which they are destined, on the basis of their condition (behavior, choices) now observed. We must not forget that where sin abounds, grace superabounds. Somehow, Van Til's model reinforces a carelessness in those seeking the lost; the temptation to consider the (perceived) lost *qua* their lostness and to abandon them is great. The grace of God is glorious and infinite and must be proclaimed despite all appearances of lostness.

Reviewing the highlights of one of Van Til's favorite parables—the prodigal son—might be instructive here. Van Til uses this story over and over again throughout his works as metaphor for rebellion against God. But too

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

rarely, in our view, does he remind us that the prodigal *returned* to the father's house. An evangelist meeting the prodigal in the pig pen would almost certainly consider him far down along the path traced by the dashed line in the non-elect common grace domain of Figure 2, descending ever down and rapidly approaching **YC**. As such he would be considered a poor prospect for apologetic and evangelistic efforts.⁵⁵ But when we meet the prodigal we may do well to heed Van Til when he says that in dealing with unbelievers we "are to make practical use of the concept 'mankind in general.'" We do not know who the unbeliever is. Our attitude should be a "conditional 'as if' attitude" because "the attitude of Christ's followers is, as Christ has told us, to be in positive imitation of God's attitude."⁵⁶

In his commentary, James Boice tracks the "three-stage" downward spiral of the sinner Paul has in view in Rom 1 and establishes an interesting and useful apologetic principle when he says:

How do you appeal for good to a person who has become like that? Every argument you could possibly use would be reversed. The case is hopeless. Hopeless? Yes, but not for God. For if it were, why would Paul even be writing this letter? As a matter of fact, if it were hopeless *he* would not be writing it, for he was one of the most hopeless cases of all, as he reminds us several times in his epistles.

We are focusing here on the idea that "God gave them up." The way I want to state this is that although in a sense God has certainly given the race *over* to the natural outworkings of its rebellious ways—a judgment we see about us on all hands—in another sense God has not "given up" at all. At least he has not given up on those on whom he has set his affection.⁵⁷

And the believer does not know on whom God has set his affection. Contrary to all appearances, it was certainly set on the prodigal. Although it is unlikely Van Til would disagree with this understanding, his common grace model leads one to think in another direction and as such affords a less hopeful apologetic stance. For in truth, the prodigal son, appearing to be approaching **YC** in the lower common grace domain of Figure 2 made a sudden U-turn and with a quantum leap found himself moving along the dashed line in the upper half of the graph, where he was promptly clothed in the white-robed righteousness of Jesus Christ, had the fatted calf placed before him, and was given to bask in the unconditional, electing love of the father amidst the felicitous company of the saints.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ It may be more accurate to consider the prodigal in the most apologetic-unfriendly environment of all in the tavern where he is squandering his inheritance in loose living. When God delivers him, first to employment with the pig farmer, then to the swine-trough itself, God's providential common grace is already at work for it is here that he "comes to himself" and, as such, he may actually constitute a *good* prospect for apologetic engagement and for receipt of special grace.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁷ James M. Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 1.183.

⁵⁸ I leave it to another day to model this movement although it is not as far-fetched as it seems. This type of movement (cyclical) is probably truer of the path to the celestial city (at

We go back for a moment to the vice catalogue in verses 28-31. In addition to underscoring the indulgence of sin by the reprobate and the concomitant descent further down their common grace domain, the list also points up the very cyclical character of the trek up the dashed line by the elect. The transitions in redemptive history are real. Believers backslide on the journey of restoration to the image of God. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it in chapter 13, while "the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed [and] this sanctification is throughout, in the whole man" it is "yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part" which "for a time may much prevail." Clearly Rom 1:32 can apply to believers in grave spiritual regression as well as to the non-elect who descend into permanent apostasy. Total depravity continues alive and well in the heart of the elect; *simul justus et peccator*. This serves to the humbling of all of God's people, all of the elect, as they recognize themselves in this vice list and realize that the path to heavenly bliss is not as smooth and trouble-free as the common grace model of Van Til might indicate. To be sure, God will never abandon believers in the absolute sense—those upon whom he has set his affection—but there is a judicial abandonment as believers, too, are left to sin's consequences and slide downhill. Thus, while restoration will eventually take place, it cannot be said so confidently that "God increases his attitude of favor upon the elect, until . . . their condition has caught up with their state." This is just not true to the biblical evidence and the lessons from history. Taking statements such as this *prima facie* unduly removes the focus from the reality of continuing sin in the elect, making their pilgrimage towards Y^C seem rather unrealistically rosy. Biblical and secular history are replete with examples of precipitous falls as well as miraculous deliverances. In fact, a judicial "giving up" can be the divinely appointed means God uses to bring about repentance. This too is taught in the parable of the prodigal son. At first glance, the desire to return to the father's house was grounded in shamefully opportunistic sentiment. Because he was hungry, the prodigal coveted the food of his father's servants. But upon closer reading we notice that he *first came to his senses*. Divine abandonment had led to remorse and for sustenance the prodigal looked to the father who had enough and to spare. All of humanity,

Y^C) then the continuous trek upwards indicated by Van Til and represented by the dashed line in Figure 2. And the converse is true for the reprobate. This is what Frame means when he says that there are "transitions" in history, a cyclical movement from wrath to favor in humanity at large and also in the life of the individual. To be controlled by a notion of the "later" is to focus on God's unchanging plan and ignore, as Van Til puts it, the "downs and ups," the transitions of history. God's predetermined, immutable plan includes change (Frame, *Van Til*, 217-20). While, as Frame observes, Van Til would hold to this, it is curious that in the development of his common grace model this cyclical movement is ignored. The focus is almost exclusively on differentiation, the rapidly widening path between the elect and the non-elect and the increasingly unequal domain of common grace (understood only, as I demonstrated earlier, in a restricted "restraint-of-sin" sense) available to these two groups respectively.

elect and non-elect alike, is involved in a willful, pervasive rebellion against God. But God invites men and women to return and share at his table, for he will never spurn a repentant sinner. It is only at **YC** that his patience terminates, when the "later" translates into the eternal, when complete differentiation obtains and condition has caught up to state.

V. *Concluding Remarks*

Cornelius Van Til's common grace paradigm is a vast improvement over that of the Amsterdam School because it takes time seriously and locates the metaphysical common ground in humanity's solidarity with Adam, thus avoiding concession of epistemological commonness. This Thomistic compromise to univocal thinking, obvious especially in the lower territories of knowledge where investigation proceeds with low degrees of epistemological self-consciousness, proved to be the undoing of the spatial model of Abraham Kuyper (Figure 1). Van Til avoids this pitfall by constructing a temporal common grace paradigm which replaces the "lower" and the "higher" with the "earlier" and the "later" and, by presupposing the self-contained ontological Trinity, makes all predication God-referent. Because in the ontological Trinity the problem of the one and the many is solved, the free offer of the gospel can be universally proclaimed in the context of divine, electing particularism, to a race whose commonness is anchored in undifferentiated "earlier" history, when general grace abounded.

But Cornelius Van Til's model, with its exclusive focus on the divine restraint of sin and with its curious neglect of the divine showering of general beneficence, can at best be considered a truncated conceptualization of the entire common grace field as developed by Kuyper and as affirmed by the Christian Reformed Church Synodical declaration of 1924 in Kalamazoo. This weakness was uncovered with the aid of the schematic development in Figure 2. Moreover, some doubt exists about the biblical foundations of Van Til's understanding of the process of differentiation central to the model, even in truncated form. One must be particularly careful in bringing in the authority of Romans 1 as evidence of this dynamic. As Van Til well put it, "theoretically, the question is exceedingly complicated."

As well, "the practical difficulties will always be great enough." The application of this model might conduce to a certain apprehension regarding the power of the gospel in the most hopeless moments of real life encounter. But if his common grace paradigm is of limited use in the practical formulation of a cogent apologetic, its presuppositions constitute a most powerful motivation to the apologetic enterprise and give Christian witness its authority and urgency. Cornelius Van Til would have us be "fearlessly anthropomorphic" in penetrating scriptural teaching as we seek to refine his common grace model upon the presuppositional foundation he has laid for us.