

which appears to simply echo the broad consensus of classical Christian teaching, provides us with a healthy starting point. Thus, analytic problems of the hiddenness of God must not fail to investigate the doctrine of sin, which is why theologians need to inform philosophers and vice versa.⁵² Finally, consider this paper's title: Is God revealed but hidden? If we take Plantinga seriously, it would be unwise, insofar as I am interpreting Plantinga correctly, to suggest that God is not hidden *to at least some degree*. Yet to what degree is God hidden, or how much? Is he, say, twenty-five percent hidden and seventy-five percent revealed? Fifty or eight-eight percent? These are indeed thorny questions to which I am not sure we can answer and certainly not in terms of percentages. But I do propose—along with Plantinga—that God is, in fact, *more revealed* than he is *hidden*.⁵³

⁵²Consider, for example, Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); William J. Abraham, *Analytic Theology: A Bibliography* (Dallas: Highland Loch Press, 2012).

⁵³I would like to thank Josh Vajda and Tyler Nelson for helpful comments on this paper. I would also like to thank Alvin Plantinga for a cordial email exchange so as to help me better understand his position. Any misrepresentation of Plantinga's position is attributed to me.

The Covenant Theology of Cornelius Van Til in Light of His Interaction with Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar

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I. INTRODUCTION

We may say that as the second person of the Trinity Christ had heard of the Greek virtues before the Greeks had heard of them. In other words, it was because in *the pactum salutis* that Christ took it upon himself to save the world, which would fall into sin and try in vain through its own ethics and its own virtues to save itself, that he now put forth his righteousness as the foundation of the virtues of those who should be in him.

-Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, 12

Cornelius Van Til is well known for his apologetic method, commonly labeled "Presuppositionalism."¹ However, he is less known for his covenant theology, as he learned it in its most academic form from Geerhardus Vos. Even still, those who do understand Van Til's covenant theology still debate its center, and therefore differ on the nature and

¹The word "presuppositionalism" was originally placed on Van Til by other authors, and he only then used it out of convenience. But in second, and now third and even fourth generation presuppositionalism, the camps are so splintered, and the word used so loosely, that the word now hardly indicates more than a Christian use of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

legitimacy of his apologetic method as well. Consequently, it will be argued here that the center of his approach is the covenant of redemption made between the Father, Son, and Spirit of the equally-ultimate one and three – the economic action of the ontological trinity regarding the plan that would be carried out for the salvation of the elect and the condemnation of the reprobate.²

The areas of his work in which this aspect protrudes most clearly is in his critique of the theology of Karl Barth, which also happens to be one of the most debated aspects of Van Til's theology.³ However, if one understands Van Til's covenantal understanding of the relationship of God to history and the foundational role of covenant in his doctrine of God, juxtaposed with the theology of Karl Barth (whom he critiqued harshly), the center of his theology emerges clearly. Since it is contended that Van Til did not understand Barth, Van Til's interaction with Hans Urs von Balthasar, whom Barth said wrote the most accurate evaluation of his own theology, will be dealt with as well.⁴ Finally, the points of divide between Van Til, on the one side, and Barth and Balthasar, who ally on the other side, is the point at which Van Til's theology of the covenant of redemption – the *pactum salutis* – and its significance for understanding the relationship between God and history becomes most clear.

Therefore, our task is to explore and differentiate the covenant theologies of Barth, Balthasar, and Van Til – whose theologies are in some respects, formally speaking, nearly identical – and to apply the insights of that differentiation in the form of a more specific articulation of Van Til's covenant theology (with special reference to the *pactum salutis* as it relates his Trinitarian theology with his theology of history) than has been concisely organized before.

II. VAN TIL'S COVENANT THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

In the late 1940s, there was a significant collision between these three theologians – a perfect storm which resulted in a conflict that lasted thirty years. The feud was so vicious that each theologian bestowed titles

²While there is not room to engage Ralph Smith's reading of Van Til as a social trinitarian, I hope not to leave room for the plausibility of Smith's thesis by the end of this piece. See Ralph Smith, *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003); idem, *Paradox and Truth: Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002).

³Bruce McCormack, "Afterword: Reflections on Van Til's Critique of Barth," *Barth and American Evangelicalism*, eds. Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 366-380.

⁴For a defense of Balthasar's reading of Barth, juxtaposed with modern readings (both Protestant and Catholic), see D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 89-128.

on one another's theologies such as "the invention of the Antichrist,"⁵ "[a belief in] a demonic God,"⁶ "an evil orthodoxy,"⁷ "ridiculous,"⁸ "foolishly... superficial,"⁹ and cannibalistic.¹⁰

There are two peculiar issues surrounding the bitter conflict between the three of them. First, it is unusual that there is any such vicious conflict in the first place, since all three individuals have much in common, both in the mission and the formal content of their theology. Regarding their mission, Barth, Van Til, and Balthasar were all militantly against Kantian and post-Kantian enlightenment philosophy (in confession, at least), as well as Protestant liberalism.¹¹ Regarding the common formal content of their theology,¹² they all shared a (1) clear trinitarian metaphysic,¹³ (2)

⁵Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1, viii-ix, cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Theology of Karl Barth*, translated by Edward T. Oakes (Köln: Hegner, 1951), 49.

⁶Cornelius Van Til, "Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 16, no. 2 (May 1954), 172.

⁷Ibid.

⁸John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008). Quoted from Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth. Exposition and Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992); and cited in George Harnick, "How Can an Elephant Understand a Whale and Vice Versa? The Dutch Origins of Cornelius Van Til's Appraisal of Karl Barth." *Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 13.

⁹Karl Barth, "To Dr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley," *Karl Barth Letters 1691-1968*, eds. Jurgen Fangmeier, Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 7.

¹⁰Ibid., 8. "You will no doubt remember what I said...for there is no true love where one man eats another." These fundamentalists want to eat me up."

¹¹For examples and expositions of the anti-enlightenment/anti-liberal agendas of Barth, Van Til, and Balthasar, cf., Kevin Diller, "Karl Barth and the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology," *The Heythrop Journal* (2010), 1035-1052; Bruce McCormack, "Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective; Karl Barth's Theological Epistemology in Conversation with a Schleiermacherian Tradition," *The Journal of Religion* 78 (January 1998), 18-37; John Webster, *Karl Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 24-48; Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), chapters. 7, 9-14; Fergus Kerr, "Forward: Assessing this 'Giddy Synthesis,'" and "Drama and the Ends of Modernity," in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 1-14, 139-172; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 15-87.

¹²The following substantial space given to quotations is necessary since these particular passages are never consolidated in another source, and are helpful for establishing the importance of the thesis, namely, that Van Til and Barth (the Protestants) were not a theological team against Balthasar (the Catholic), but in fact, Barth and Balthasar rejected Van Til (and vice versa) – even though a cornerstone of Barth and Van Til's theologies was an outspoken contempt for Roman Catholicism – because of differences in their respective trinitarian theologies which will be delineated below.

¹³For instance, Barth states that "God possesses space, His own space, and...just because of this spatiality, he is able to be triune" *Church Dogmatics* II.1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 468. Cited in Colin Gunton, "Barth, The Trinity, and Human Freedom," *Theology Today* 18, no. 1 (April 1986), 317. Van Til asserts that "I am interested in defending the metaphysics that come from Scripture. This involves: (a) the doctrine of the self-contained God or ontological Trinity," in Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and

distinctly covenantal epistemology,¹⁴ (3) creator/creature distinction,¹⁵ (4) Christocentric doctrine of revelation,¹⁶ and (5) a governing category of analogy in their epistemology.¹⁷ Second, among the three, there was an

Reformed), 236. Finally, Balthasar writes that "Since Christ is the fulfillment of the cosmos, and the plenitude of the divinity sent into the world, since, too, he fills heaven and earth and fathers them together in himself as Head, surely he is more than the redeemer from sin." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 209. Cited in Roland Chia, *Revelation and Theology: The knowledge of God in Balthasar and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 31.

¹⁴Barth claims that "We are not created the covenant-partners of God, but to be His covenant-partners, to be His partners in the history which is the goal of creation and in which His work as Creator finds its continuation and fulfillment." *CD III.2*, 205. Cited in Kenneth Oakes, "The Question of Nature and Grace in Karl Barth: Humanity as Creature and Covenant-Partner," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (October 2007), 608. Van Til, on the other hand says that "In paradise man's knowledge was self-consciously analogical; man wanted to know the facts of the universe in order to fulfill his task as a covenant keeper." See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2007), 63. And in contrast, Balthasar asserts that "God wills to maintain his relation to the world only with Jesus Christ as the center of that relationship, the content and fulfillment of the eternal covenant." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Ignatius Press, 1963), 24.

¹⁵Cf., Barth who argues that "As God exists only together with this One, and so too the world, His existence as such is the fact in which *God and the world*, however they may oppose or contradict one another, are not of course one and the same." *CD IV.3*, 39. Cited by Jim Cassidy in "Election and Trinity," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71 (2009), 64; Van Til who asserts that "Having made alliance with Satan, man makes a grand monistic assumption." Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 63; and Balthasar's idea that "Created being must be by definition created, dependent, relative, nondivine, but as something created it cannot be utterly dissimilar to its Creator." von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 285. Cited in Chia, *Revelation and Theology*, 30.

¹⁶Barth affirms that "The Christ message is. . . not one truth among others; it is the truth. In thinking of God, we have from the beginning to think of the name Jesus Christ. 'And who in eternity for our good will be and remain man'—the truth of the covenant, the unity of God and man, by being an historical truth which became real at that time and place, is no transitory truth." See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), 69-70, emphasis mine. In distinction, Van Til claims "For the Jews the Old Testament and its ordinances had become a form that would contain any content that respectable men might care to put into. For Jesus the Old Testament continued to be the direct concrete revelation of God to his people centering in its promise with respect to himself," in Van Til *Christ and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), 70. Lastly, Balthasar observes "It is he who was to take flesh in the middle of time – and not the disincarnate Logos – who is the firstborn in the mind of God and the 'beginning of the creation of God,'" in *Prayer*, 209. Cited in Chia, *Revelation and Theology*, 31.

¹⁷Barth confesses that "Yes. Exactly speaking it is true that in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* I said something very nasty about *analogia entis*. I said it was the invention of the Antichrist. Later on I began to see that the notion of analogy cannot totally be suppressed in theology," in Karl Barth, "Gespräch in Princeton I," in *Gesamtausgabe: IV Gespräche 1959-1962*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995), 499. Cited in Kenneth Oakes, "The Question of Nature and Grace in Karl Barth," 605. Van Til postulates that "The 'system' thus produced as, e.g., it finds expression in the Reformed confessions of faith, intends to be an analogical system. At no point does such a system intend to state, point for point, the identical content of the original system of the mind of God." See *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 43. And regarding this concept, Balthasar contends that "...there cannot be any strict disparity between the philosophical and the

unusual alliance between Barth and Balthasar, which was unlikely, since it would seem that Barth and Van Til (the two Protestants) should have allied in their mutual disdain for Roman Catholic theology against Balthasar.¹⁸ Nevertheless, by the 1960s, the battle lines were drawn between Barth and Balthasar on one side and Van Til, as the "covenant head" of what Barth called "the fundamentalists" on the other.¹⁹

It is this second historical peculiarity which will occupy the current section – specifically what are the historical-theological factors which contributed to the alliance of Barth and von Balthasar?²⁰ Furthermore, why was Van Til content with being considered an outsider when all three theologies, as mentioned before, had so much formal overlap?²¹ The purpose of this section is to suggest that Van Til was incompatible with the symphonized theologies of Barth and Balthasar because of his belief in (1) the equal ultimacy between the *ousia* (one) and the *hypostases* (three) of God in his trinitarian theology, (2) a rigid distinction between the ontological trinity and the economic trinity, and (3) a consequent "analogous" theology of historical facts, as opposed to Barth and Balthasar's (4) prioritization of either the *ousia* (Barth) or the *hypostases* (Balthasar) in their trinitarian theologies, (5) a collapsing of either the

theological use of the same concepts, but rather *analogy*. This is a noetic analogy *imbedded in the unceasing suspension of nature between its concrete and its abstract sense*... Both analogies—in being and in concept—do not neatly overlap... The analogy also expresses that no human concept can unambiguously, systematically, neutrally and univocally depict the ontic movement as it is happening in the eyes of God." *Karl Barth*, 281.

¹⁸Barth says, "I regard the doctrine of the analogy of being as the invention of the Antichrist and hold that *precisely because of this doctrine one cannot become a Catholic*." Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1, viii-ix. Cited by Balthasar *Karl Barth*, 49. Likewise Van Til says, "This principle of the self-sufficient or autonomous man must be exterminated wherever it is found. It is found in the theology of Rome. As true followers of the Reformation, we must think of every attempt to prove the existence of God—natural theology—as the invention of the Antichrist." See Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), Appendix 4.

¹⁹It is in 1961 that Barth called Van Til a cannibal and in 1965 that he called him "the fundamentalist." It is in 1962 that Van Til published *Christianity and Barthianism*, explicating further his 1947 thesis in *The New Modernism* that Barth's Christianity was an entirely different type of religion than Orthodox Christianity, and that one must choose between the Christ of Barthianism and the Christ of Christianity. Consult Karl Barth to E. R. Geehan, November 14, 1965, copy, *C. Van Til Papers*, Montgomery Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary). Cited in Harnick, "How Can an Elephant Understand a Whale," 14. Also see Karl Barth, "Dr. Geoffrey W. Bromily," *Karl Barth Letters*, 8; and Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962).

²⁰D. Stephen Long recently commented, "Barth and Balthasar's friendship was unlikely, but theologically significant. . . . Barth was staunchly Reformed, Balthasar a devout Roman Catholic," in *Saving Karl Barth*, 7.

²¹And the all-important point is that Von Balthasar as a Roman Catholic theologian expresses basic agreement with the principle. . . . Von Balthasar calls Barth the theologian in whom the principle of the Reformation has come to its most consistent expression... This radicalizing of the Reformation principle amounts to a radical rejection of that principle." Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 354.

economic trinity into the ontological trinity (Barth) or the ontological trinity into the economic trinity (Balthasar), and (6) theology of history which imposes either equivocation (Barth) or absolute univocality (Balthasar) on the relationship between God in Christ and history.²²

One might object that the doctrine of revelation seems to be of greatest importance for Van Til in particular, especially as it pertains to his evaluation of the theologies of Barth and Balthasar.²³ However, the theologies of revelation of Barth and Balthasar are accidental to their doctrines of God. And, as will be discussed below, their theologies of history, anthropology, epistemology, and God, are grounded in their Christology, which inextricably links them all to the same locus of the theological encyclopedia.²⁴

Furthermore, Van Til says that "it is a well-known fact that all heresies in the history of the church have in some form or other taught subordinationism,"²⁵ and it is quite clear that Van Til considered Barthianism and "Romanism" to be heresies. For instance, he once said "[My veteran nephew] used to see Japanese in his dreams. I see . . . Barth: which is worse?"²⁶ He also speaks of the "Romanist" and the "Christian" as distinct.²⁷ So evidently there was a personal element to the conflict.

That being said, general biographical factors – such as political, social, filial, economic, and environmental (and personal) – are only able to account for the broader aspects of the formally common theologies which Barth, Van Til, and Balthasar shared, and not the militant split among the three, and more particularly, the Barth–Balthasar alliance. Therefore, the present thesis has, as its starting point, the presupposition that the three points of theological differences noted above are the primary theological factors which contributed to the enmity between these theologians, as well as the explanation for where the battle lines

²²The historical-theological categories used for synthesizing the primary source data for Barth, which very helpfully informed the thesis at hand, are derived in large part from: Jim Cassidy, "Election and Trinity," 53-81; Lane G. Tipton, "The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004; and Matthew Paul Welch Roberts, "Covenantal Knowledge; Integrating Covenant Theology into Theological Prolegomena," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2008.

²³Barth's substitution of the idea of the analogy of faith for the idea of dialecticism does not indicate a radical change in the method of his thought. . . . Even so, the change from dialecticism to analogy is a change that takes place within the general overarching activist notion of revelation. According to this notion of revelation, God is wholly revealed and wholly hidden in his revelation. . . . Barth has not changed his basic view of revelation. And the all-important point is that Von Balthasar as a Roman Catholic theologian expresses basic agreement with this principle." Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 354.

²⁴Ibid., 438, 441.

²⁵Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 48. Cited in Tipton, "Triune Personal God," 102.

²⁶Muether, *Van Til*, 128. Cornelius Van Til's letter to Henry Van Til, December 20, 1949. Cited in Harnick, "How Can an Elephant Understand a Whale," 28.

²⁷Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2003), 46, 98; idem, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 39.

fell. It is in light of these battle lines that Van Til's covenant theology is displayed in its most unique and detailed form.

III. KARL BARTH

Barth's theology was a reaction to the liberal existential theologians of the 19th century who had relegated the entire phenomenon of religion to the sphere of empirical human phenomena. Its spearhead, and Barth's primary whipping boy, Friedrich Schleiermacher, says "Religion is . . . above all and essentially an intuition and feeling."²⁸ Schleiermacher's goal was to protect the transcendence of God from the expanding Enlightenment empire of Kant's autonomous mind – a mind with the ability to understand all facts rightly through intuition and experience, extending even to God. Bruce McCormack explains on behalf of Barth, "For if God is a transcendent, wholly spiritual being . . . then God is unintuitable and . . . cannot be known . . . The result was that Kant reduced God to a regulative idea wholly lacking in content."²⁹ However, in defending the idea of God through emotional intuition against Kant's dichotomy of the mind's autonomous intuition and meaninglessness, Schleiermacher still implicitly validates the distinction.

Against the existentialist rationale, although Barth does oppose the system of Schleiermacher (and Kant) in principle, in practice, he presupposes it in the opposite direction of Schleiermacher by accepting its agenda and operating on its terms. Barth says that "the nineteenth century's task remains for us, too,"³⁰ and "Jesus as the Christ can only be understood as a problem, *only* as a myth, within the realm of historical intuitability. Jesus as the Christ brings the world of the Father, of which we who stand within the realm of historical intuitability know nothing and never will know anything. . . . The resurrection is the . . . entrance of . . . the Unknown and Unintuitable in Jesus."³¹ In other words, for Barth, God is relegated strictly to Kant's "noumenal" realm with regard to both his salvific operation and meaning.³²

²⁸Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Addresses on Religion* (1789). Cited in Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 18.

²⁹McCormack, "Revelation and History," 20.

³⁰Karl Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), 12. Cited in Webster, *Karl Barth*, 15. Barth also acknowledges, "if I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard [back of Schleiermacher] called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.'" Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1968), 10. Cited in Roberts, "Covenantal Knowledge," 24.

³¹Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 1922 (Zürich: TVZ, 1940), 5-6. Cited in McCormack, "Revelation and History," 26.

³²Interestingly, in Barth's earlier life he was the editor of a journal that would later impact Balthasar's anti-enlightenment agenda. W. H. Auden writes, speaking of Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, "Also, together with Leo Weismantel, Werner Picht, Hans Ehrenberg,

1. Prioritization of the *Ousia*

With regard to the single *ousia* and the three *hypostases* of God, Barth more often than not gives priority to the *ousia* in his consideration of the most basic qualities of God's identity. He says, "[We] may unhesitatingly equate the Lordship of God...with what the vocabulary of the early church calls the essence of God, the *deitas* or *divinitas*, the divine *ousia*, *essentia*, *natura*, or *substantia*."³³ This prioritization becomes his theological rationale for what some have identified as modalism: "The biblical witness to God's revelation sets us face to face with the possibility of interpreting the one statement that 'God reveals Himself as the Lord' three times in different senses. This possibility is the biblical root of the doctrine of the Trinity."³⁴

Likewise, Barth makes clear his prioritization of the *ousia* to the exclusion of the *hypostases* in his consideration of the idea of the *pactum salutis*, about which he says,

The thought of a purely inter-trinitarian decision as the eternal basis of the covenant of grace may be found both sublime and uplifting. But it is definitely much too uplifting and sublime to be a Christian thought...How can even the most perfect decision in the bosom of the Godhead, if the Godhead remains alone, be the origin of the covenant, if it is made in the absence of the one who must be present as the second partner at the institution of the covenant to make it a real covenant, that is, man? To unite God in His attitude to man—whether in respect of His properties, or as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—there is no need of any particular pact or decree. God would not be God if He were not God in this unity.³⁵

It seems that for Barth, the very idea of an intra-trinitarian covenant is impossible because there are not two, far less three, distinct agents who are *autotheos* between whom a covenant may exist. For Barth, the only other entity besides the God who is who he is in his unity alone that he considers, is man, which is again telling of the absence of a real

Karl Barth, and Viktor von Weizsäcker, he founded the *Patmos Verlag*, publishing works focused on new religious, philosophical, and social perspectives... A journal, *Die Kreatur* (1926-30), followed, edited by Josef Wittig, a Roman Catholic; Martin Buber, a Jew; and Viktor von Weizsäcker, a Protestant. Among the contributors were Nicholas Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, Franz Rosenzweig, Ernst Simon, Hugo Bergmann, Rudolf Hallo, and Florens Christian Rang. Each of these men had, between 1910 and 1932, in one way or another, offered an alternative to the idealism, positivism, and historicism that dominated German universities." Auden, "A Brief Biography of Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy," in *I Am an Impure Thinker* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books, 2001), 196.

³³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 349; (henceforth *CD* for *Church Dogmatics*). Cited in Tipton, "The Triune Personal God," 90.

³⁴Barth, *CD* I.1, 376.

³⁵Barth, *CD* IV.1, 66. Cited in Smith, *Eternal Covenant*, 12.

distinction of persons within the Godhead. Yet this single, modal essence of God must, for Barth, be qualified by an even more foundational concept: God as pure act.

2. Collapsing of the Economic Trinity into the Ontological Trinity

For Barth, God's action is not only coterminous with his ontic status as the *a se* God, but actually precedes and substantiates his essence; thus, "What God is as God, the divine individuality and characteristics, the *essential* or 'essence' of God, is something which we shall encounter either at the place where God deals with us as Lord and Savior, or not at all."³⁶ This is not simply a judgment concerning human epistemological finiteness, but regards the very model of divinity, for Barth requires that "we cannot escape the action of God for a God who is not active. This is not only because we ourselves cannot, but because *there is no surpassing or bypassing at all of divine action* . . . To its very deepest depths God's Godhead consists in the fact that it is [the] event— . . . in which we have a share in God's revelation."³⁷ That is, at the most fundamental level of God's personhood, there lies, not even being-in-process, but rather an unquantifiable, unintuitable, absolute economic process, or, "*Actus Purus . . . et singularis* [single and pure act]."³⁸

In Barth's collapsing of God's economic activity into the divine ontology, he attains warrant to allocate all of God's activity to a realm outside of human experience by virtue of Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction" between Creator and creature.³⁹ That is, because God's activity occurs exclusively in a sphere which is categorically incompatible with human processes by virtue of divine transcendence, the processes of the human subject (rationality, experience, intuition, etc.), can never mediate the divine process by their own power.⁴⁰ Therefore, the notion of articulating a statement that is statically true of God violates what is most "essential" to his personhood: absolute process.

³⁶Barth, *CD* II.1, 261.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 263. Emphasis mine. The rest of Barth's statement solidifies his prioritization of action in the consideration of the divine identity even further: "We are dealing with the being of God: but with regard to the being of God, the word 'event' or 'act' is *final*, and cannot be surpassed or compromised. To its very deepest depths God's Godhead consists in the fact that it is an event—not any event, not events in general, but the event of His action, in which we have a share in God's revelation." Emphasis original.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 264.

³⁹Barth, *Romans*, 10.

⁴⁰Barth, *CD* II.1, 269. Barth explains further, "It is not only to unmoved nature and unmoved spirit, but to our motivated and motivating being that God's being stands in contradistinction, as the one and only being that is self-motivated."

3. Equivocation of God in Christ and History

These two aspects of Barth's theology – his prioritization of the *ousia* and the collapsing of the economic trinity into the ontological trinity, lay the foundation for his theology of history: an ultimate equivocation of the life-history of Jesus Christ and history in general, such that the two histories qualitatively overlap at every point and yet do not intersect at a single point. They are one and the same in the body of Christ, and absolutely separated in the binary opposition of his incarnate deity. It is necessary at this point to quote Barth at length in order to have a proper understanding of his theology of the relationship between God and history.⁴¹ Barth says,

The divine being must be allowed to transcend both spirit and nature, yet also to overlap and comprehend both, as attested in His revelation according to the testimony of Holy Scripture. We have to enquire into the event and act and life of God—in His transcendence as against the whole created world, in the order appropriate to the matter—but also in the direction of what we think we know as 'natural event.'⁴²

That is, God is so wholly other that he is "against the *whole* created world," and yet also overlapping with all created spiritual and "natural events." However, for Barth both the exhaustive "against" and the "overlap" of God's relationship to human history are as equally indispensable as they are interdependent, and both only insofar as they contradict and fulfill one another. In his own words:

God's revelation is a particular event, not identical with the sum, nor identical with any of the content of other existing happenings either in nature or in human history. It is a definite happening with general happening: so definite that, while it takes part in this happening, it also contradicts it, and can only be seen and comprehended together with it in its contradiction, without the possibility of a synthesis, apart from the synthesis proclaimed and already fulfilled in itself. So, too, the action of God that takes place in revelation is a particular action, different from any other happening, even in contradiction to it.⁴³

For Barth, a synthesis is both impossible *and* necessary for the understanding of the contradiction, and the contradiction is the proleptic

⁴¹It must be noted that, although Barth speaks of revelation, the topic at hand is not his theology of revelation, but only that theology which regards the overarching category of his equivocation of God in Christ and history.

⁴²Barth, *CD* II.1, 266-267.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 264.

fulfillment of the impossible synthesis. The revelation of God is not identical with any other happenings in human history, yet it shares exhaustive qualitative overlap with all of them. Van Til's words are, again, entirely appropriate, that, in Barth's view, regardless of whether he holds to an "analogy" or a "dialectic" (once called "the dialectic of analogy"),⁴⁴ "God is wholly revealed and wholly hidden in his revelation,"⁴⁵ and therefore wholly synthesized and contradicted in himself, that is, in the hypostatic union, which is the epicenter of all of Barth's coterminous rationality and anti-rationalism. He says, finally,

The Creator, God Himself, exists only as He does so together with this One who also exists as man, and each and everything in the created world exists only together with this One who also exists as man...As God exists only together with this One, and so too the world, His existence as such is the fact in which *God and the world*, however they may oppose or contradict one another, are not of course one and the same, but do exist together in an inviolable and indissoluble co-existence and conjunction...so that His life-action is identical with that of God himself, His history with the divine history.⁴⁶

Put simply, for Barth the life-history of Christ *is* the history of the created order, yet simultaneously distinct from it, because if God as one is *prior* to God as three, and that single essence is "indissoluble co-existence and conjunction" with his act of relating to the world, then the doctrine of the hypostatic union is the contradicting synthesis which stands over against – yet is fulfilled in – itself. Therefore the impetus and rationale for creation is only in creating man so that God can become who he truly is: "Jesus Christ—not an empty *Logos*, but Jesus Christ the incarnate Word, the baby born in Bethlehem, the man put to death at Golgotha and raised in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea, the man whose history this is... alone is there at the beginning of all things."⁴⁷

For Barth, God is (in a sense) eternally incarnate and is thereby the norming norm of history. It is by virtue of the incarnation that God and the world "exist together in an inviolable and indissoluble co-existence and conjunction," such that if "His life-action is identical with that of God himself,"⁴⁸ then the eternal life-action of God simply *is* God being the incarnate Christ. The incarnation is the meaning of God, and therefore, by

⁴⁴Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis: Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1985), 139.

⁴⁵Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 354.

⁴⁶Barth, *CD* IV.3, 39. Cited in Cassidy, "Election and Trinity," 64.

⁴⁷Barth, *CD* IV.1, ix. Cited by Cassidy in "Election and Trinity," 63.

⁴⁸Barth, *CD* IV.3, 39.

virtue of God's "motivation" of the world, is the norming norm of human history, even though he stands over against it.⁴⁹

IV. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

The historical circumstance that contextualizes Balthasar for the task at hand is his encounter with Barthianism at a relatively early point in his career. Roland Chia observes that Balthasar was impacted significantly by Barth in three ways, which just so happen to be the same areas in which Barth and Van Til disagree; those being, (1) the radically christomonistic epicenter for his theological system, (2) his theology of history as defined in terms of the universal participation of the created order in the being of God through the hypostatic union, and (3) Barth's particular notion of analogy, which although Barth argued that it was a strict *analogia fidei*, Balthasar contended that it relied on a notion of the Thomistic *analogia entis*.⁵⁰

1. Prioritization of the *Hypostases*

Balthasar is not as radical as Barth with his rhetoric in speaking of the relationship between the one and the three, but he exclusively speaks of the essence of God as belonging to a member of the Trinity. Here the classical Thomistic conception of God's singular essence does not fit into Balthasar's theology of the eternal love of the self-giving and self-receiving intimate interpenetration of the three persons. The very *otherness* which the community of the three allows is *de facto* precluded in Thomistic oneness, and is therefore inconceivable as having the same divine qualities as three.⁵¹ However, the largest manifestation of Balthasar's prioritization of the *hypostases* over the *ousia* in his consideration of the divine identity is in his collapsing of the ontological trinity into the economic trinity.

2. Collapsing the Ontological Trinity

For Balthasar, the very essence of God may be found in the eternal giving of the Father, the receiving of the Son, and the eternal sealing of

⁴⁹Barth, *CD* II.1, 269. "It is not only to unmoved nature and unmoved spirit, but to *our* motivated and motivating being that God's being stands in contradistinction, as the one and only being that is self-motivated." (Emphasis mine).

⁵⁰Chia, *Revelation and Theology*, 32.

⁵¹Of course, Thomists would disagree, but that debate cannot be addressed here. For a sympathetic and a critical approach to the compatibility of one and three in Thomistic thought, cf., (respectively) James Dolezal, "Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God's Personal Relations," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2014), 79-98; Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation into Aquinas' Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 217.

the Spirit – however, due to his reading of Barth, Balthasar has a strong Christological emphasis that is primarily missional in nature. More specifically, Balthasar says that Christ is "the eternal Son dwelling in time,"⁵² and that the mission of Christ to obey the father and die for the church is "a modality of his eternal personal being." Likewise, it is the Father's begetting of the Son which, for Balthasar, provokes the Son unto obedience *in eternity* so that the Son's eternal attitude toward the Father may be considered one of "allowing the Father to do with him as he pleases."⁵³

One can see Barth in Balthasar's statement "God's love in heaven involves an eternal interplay of active generation and passive being begotten and being breathed forth."⁵⁴ Yet it is not the same as Barth's transcendentalizing of God's action into and behind God's eternal essence, but is a bringing of the divine essence into his economic activity, such that his essence is equal to his action and *within* the same sphere of being which contains both nature and supernature.

Furthermore, "by 'generating' the consubstantial Son...[the Father] expands to a kenosis involving the whole Trinity. For the Son could not be consubstantial with the Father except by self-expropriation."⁵⁵ That is, the Father's relation with himself – more than that, his *identity* – is in the interrelations of the three persons of the Trinity and no more. This is why Balthasar can say, "the Son's *missio* is the economic form of his eternal *processio* from the Father."⁵⁶ That is, the economic activity of the persons of the Trinity *toward creation* mirror their respective functions in the ontological Trinity. Balthasar insists that the "Father's self-utterance in the generation of the Son" is the "initial 'kenosis' within the Godhead that underpins all subsequent kenosis."⁵⁷ This is not to say that Balthasar flirts with a "process theology," for he qualifies himself to guard against

⁵²Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory III: The Dramatis Personae: The Person of Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 228. Cited in Linn Marie Tonstad, "Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross, Kenosis, and Hierarchy in the *Theo-Drama*," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (October 2010), 605.

⁵³Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory III*, 201. Cited in Tonstad, "Sexual Difference," 605.

⁵⁴Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 87-88. He is here quoting Adrienne von Speyr. Cited in Tonstad, "Sexual Difference," 607.

⁵⁵Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 331. This is one of Balthasar's statements which stands in clear contrast to Van Til's theology – Van Til says, "I consider it of the greatest importance to distinguish between God's being and works *ad intra*, such as the eternal generation of the Son from the Father and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son, and the works of God *ad extra*, such as creation and providence." Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 228.

⁵⁶Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: III*, 201; Balthasar is here referring to *Summa Theologica* I, 43.1. Cited in Tonstad, "Sexual Difference," 604.

⁵⁷Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: IV*, 323.

such implications,⁵⁸ but it does serve to demonstrate the inverse in which the counterfactuals indexed in God's *potentia* are restricted to those which in some way mirror the processions.

3. Univocality of God in Christ and History

It is in the area of God's relationship with human history that Balthasar's Barthian curiosities blossom. It is for Balthasar, just like Barth, that the *hypostatic union* is the very ontological ground and overarching setting for human history. Balthasar says,

By virtue of the hypostatic union, there is nothing in [Christ] which does not serve God's self-revelation. As the *center of the world*, he is the key to the interpretation not only of creation, but of God himself...We cannot separate his word from his existence: it possesses his truth only in the context of his...giving himself for the truth and love of the Father even unto death on the Cross...This identity of word and existence was not of result of fanatical self-deification...but is sheer service and obedience to the Father...*His word cannot...be reduced to the dimension of that general relationship between God and the world which appears to be given as inherent and creation; because God wills to maintain his relation to the world only with Jesus Christ as the center of that relationship, the content and fulfillment of the eternal covenant.*⁵⁹

Balthasar here pushes the relationship between God and history past mere analogy to univocality by insisting that the relationship "cannot be reduced to the dimension of that general relationship between God and the world," but is fully explicated in "his relation to the world *only* with Jesus Christ as the center of that relationship." Expressing a Barthian inclination, Balthasar says that "the involvement of man in the divine action is part of God's *action*, not a precondition of it."⁶⁰ That is, for the Barth-Balthasar theological alliance, it is the eternal *Geschichte* (life-history) of the incarnate Christ into which all of world history is subsumed, and from which all of history flows. It is the given eternal action of God, as Christ for Barth, and to Christ for Balthasar. Balthasar explains,

⁵⁸See *Ibid.*, 323-324 and Jacob H. Friesenhahn, *The Trinity and Theodicy: The Trinitarian Theology of von Balthasar and the Problem of Evil*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 135-136, 151-155. Friesenhahn helpfully consolidates Balthasar's rejection of Rahner's rule. Yet besides those few times when Balthasar is explicit about the self-sufficiency of the ontological trinity, distinct from the economic, he otherwise presupposes a mutual dependence, specifically the above quoted passage regarding the trinity's kenotic ontology.

⁵⁹Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 22-24. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁰Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I*, 18.

We find the reason for...analogical relation by looking at the center, Jesus Christ himself...We cannot separate his word from his existence: it possesses his truth only in the context of his life, that is of his giving himself for the truth and love of the Father even unto death on the Cross. Without the Cross, which means equally without the Eucharist, his word would not be true, it would not be that testimony to the Father which contains within itself the testimony of the Father as well (Jn 8:18)...The facts are not only a phenomenal analogy for a doctrine lying behind them and abstractable from them...they are, grasped in their depth and totality, the meaning itself. The historical life of the Logos—to which his death, Resurrection and Ascension belong—is, as such, that very world of ideas which, directly or reductively, gives the norm for all history; yet not as coming forth from some non-historical height above, but from the living center of history itself. Seen from the highest, definitive point of view, it is the source of history, the point whence the whole of history before and after Christ emanates: its center.⁶¹

V. CORNELIUS VAN TIL

1. Equal Ultimacy of the *Ousia* and the *Hypostases*

Van Til explicates his theology of the *ousia* and *hypostases* in similar fashion. Lane Tipton says, citing Van Til (who is referencing Calvin), "Calvin's doctrine of the Son and the Spirit as *autotheos* was designed to 'emphasize the fact that "The three persons of the Trinity are co-substantial; not one is derived in *his substance* form either or both the others. Yet there are *three distinct persons* in this unity; the diversity and the identity are *equally underived.*"⁶² Yet it is in consideration of the relationship of the Trinity to the philosophical problem of the one and the many that Van Til is clearest in expressing his equal prioritization of the *ousia* and the *hypostases*. He says, "The God that philosophers have been looking for, a God in whom unity and diversity are equally ultimate...has been made known to us by grace."⁶³ For Van Til, neither the one, nor the three, can be prioritized in a trinitarian formulation.

2. Rigid Distinction Between the Ontological Trinity and the Economic Trinity

Van Til says of the relationship between the ontological trinity and the economic trinity that

⁶¹Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 20, 24.

⁶²Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 28.

⁶³Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), 9.

Christ came to bring man back to God. To do this he was and had to be truly God. For this reason the church has emphasized the fact that Christ was 'Very God of Very God.' *Here it appears how important it is that we first think of the ontological Trinity before we think of the economical Trinity.* It was the second person of the ontological Trinity, who was, in respect of his essence, fully equal with the Father, who therefore existed from all eternity with the Father, who in the incarnation assumed a human nature.⁶⁴

Again, he says "Reformed theologians therefore distinguish between the ontological and the economical Trinity, the former referring to the three persons of the Godhead in their internal relations to one another, the latter referring to the works of this triune God with respect to the created universe."⁶⁵ Van Til, like Barth and Balthasar, does not deal with God as though the distinction does not matter, or as though the distinction were logically subsidiary or peripheral. Yet his use of the incarnation in coordinating his theology proper begins to separate him in trinitarian and historiographical theology, in that God is *only* incarnate in the incarnation as an event in history, and not in eternity, which leads us to the final point regarding Van Til.

3. Covenantal Theology of Historical Facts

Van Til posits a history of humanity which does not begin with Christology, but with the ontological Trinity – with the one and the three. He says, "It is clear that my philosophy of history is based upon the idea of the counsel or plan of God. It is not the knowledge of God that produces the facts of the created universe; it is rather the will of God, as carrying out the plan of God."⁶⁶ However, what is important for understanding Van Til's theology of history in light of his polemic toward Barth and Balthasar is that the relationship between God and history is not foremost dialectical or analogical (with reference either to the *analogia entis* or the *analogia fidei*), but covenantal. In brief, Van Til states,

Now this covenant relation between God and the finite world enables us, therefore, to maintain in the last analysis, the absolute dependence of creation upon God, so that no substance, or power or "phenomenal chance, act or quality has its certainty outside of the plan of God, and yet also it gives to creation that reality outside of

⁶⁴Ibid., 37.

⁶⁵Ibid., 241.

⁶⁶Ibid., 43. Exactly what that plan is will be discussed below.

God that must be maintained over against Pantheism. The world is no emanation of God, nor is it in deistic fashion independent of Him.⁶⁷

Moreover, the relationship between God and history is not simply covenantal, but the covenanting which God performs is an act which is done by the economic trinity only, which sets him apart from Barth and Balthasar in the most significant way. Van Til says, "Now as God is, so He works. This ontological Trinity forms the basis of the economical Trinity ... All the relation of God to temporal existence is accordingly a covenant relation. It is the One God that creates, yet it is through covenant relation that He creates; it is the One God that redeems but it is through covenant relation that he redeems."⁶⁸

For Van Til then, all of the common vocabulary that he shares with Barth and Balthasar, such as "salvation history," "incarnation," "covenant," and even "God," are defined rather differently. It is therefore each theologian's conception of history which can be seen as the climax of each one's doctrine of God. For Barth and Balthasar, salvation history is not only required, it is bound up in the very essence of the ontological trinity, which is allowed for by their prioritization of either the *ousia* or the *hypostases*. For Van Til, however, it is the equal ultimacy of the *ousia* and the *hypostases* that allows him to retain such a rigid distinction between the ontological trinity and the economic trinity, which then allows for an eternal covenantal foundation of salvation history, an attempt to protect the ontology and freedom of God.

VI. ORTHODOXY AND CONTINGENCY: TRINITY AND COVENANT HISTORY IN VAN TIL

Ultimately, Barth and Balthasar's trinitarian theologies (with regard to their prioritization of either the one or the three), the equivocation of the ontological trinity and the economic trinity, and the historiographical implications thereof are intrinsic to the deep-structure historical-theological rationale that fostered their sympathy for one another's projects and their separation from Van Til. Barth and Balthasar have mutual respect for one another's theology, despite their conflict, because of all of the theological commonalities described above.⁶⁹ Van Til once asked Barth, "In what sense is [the resurrection] a datable, objective, past event?"⁷⁰ For Van Til then, the difference between himself and Barth

⁶⁷Cornelius Van Til, "Covenant," in *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til*, compiled by E. H. Sidward (New York, New York: Labels Army Company, electronic ed.).

⁶⁸Cornelius Van Til, "Trinity," in *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til*.

⁶⁹Cf., Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*. Cited in Webster, *Karl Barth*, 22.

⁷⁰Karl Barth, *Karl Barth Letters 1691-1968*, eds., Jurgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 342-343.

primarily relied on a perceived relationship between God and history, a category in which he also placed Balthasar.⁷¹

To clarify this point, Van Til initially asks, "What is the nature of the Christ [the explicit center] of Barth's theology?" And then he answers his own question by that "For Barth Jesus Christ is the Christ-Event. Barth has actualized the incarnation. He has reinterpreted Chalcedon. The two natures of Christ are therefore related to one another in terms of God's saving of all men. Jesus Christ is the history of the salvation of all men. . . There is no transition from wrath to grace in history."⁷² In turn, the basis for Van Til's assessment derives from assorted statements of Barth such as, "Where and when is He not both humiliated and exalted, already exalted in His humiliation, and humiliated in His exaltation. . . We have to do with the being of the one and entire Jesus Christ whose humiliation detracts nothing and whose exaltation adds nothing."⁷³ In addition, it should be noted that Balthasar shows basic agreement when he states that "All scriptural problems must be approached through Christology: the letter is related to the Spirit as the flesh of Christ."⁷⁴ What we can observe from this engagement is that Van Til frames his differences with Barth and Balthasar in terms of systematic and biblical theology, which could very well be a reframed relationship between God and history.⁷⁵

1. The Covenant of Redemption as the Foundation of Van Til's Philosophy History: The *Pactum Salutis*

For Van Til, the relationship between God and history can be understood in terms of the first decree: the covenant of redemption – or, the *pactum salutis* (hence forth, "the *pactum*"). The *pactum* is "the free agreement that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit effect in order to carry out

⁷¹ Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 438.

⁷² Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁷³ Barth, *CD*, IV, 133.

⁷⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1989), 149. In his systematic synthesis (perhaps the first of its kind) of Balthasar's sixteen-book "tryplich" (including the Epilogue), Junius Johnson summarizes Balthasar's thought, "Christ is himself a Trinitarian reality: as the expressive midpoint of the Trinity, he offers that which is imitable about the Trinity for imitation" and "[Christ] is the measure of Trinitarian being itself." Junius Johnson, *Christ and Analogy: The Christocentric Metaphysics of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 141-142, 144.

⁷⁵ Barth and von Balthasar both concede Van Til's proposed contradiction between them. Balthasar says: "And things get particularly grotesque ten years later when Cornelius van Til's *The New Modernism* (1947) appears, which not only tries to explain the later work in terms of the earlier writings but bases the whole of Barth's theology on a philosophy that supposedly lies at the root of all Barth's thinking," yet Barth says, "My difference from Balthasar has nothing whatever to do with the ecumenical question. It is simply that, like many Protestants, he is interested in certain philosophical structures of my theology instead of in the theology itself." Cf., Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 60-61; Barth, *Karl Barth Letters*, 112.

God's plan for history, and, more centrally, to bring glory to himself."⁷⁶ Van Til's instructor in Old Testament theology, Geerhardus Vos explains, as Van Til later exhibits in his own theology, the foundational nature of the *pactum* in their line of conservative Reformed thought, saying, "In the dogma of the counsel of peace . . . [o]nly when it becomes plain how it is rooted . . . in God's being itself . . . can the covenant idea be thought of theologically."⁷⁷ It is worth quoting Van Til at length here. He says,

All the decrees, having reference to creation or recreation, i.e. to all finite existence, are accordingly of the nature of an agreement between the persons of the Divine Essence; i.e. the relation between the Divine persons is a covenant relation. In this eternal covenant, the covenant of the decrees, God deals with man. In one sense these decrees are *opera ad intra*, because they still effect nothing historical, yet in another sense they are *opera ad extra*, because they have reference to that which will historically occur. *But in each case they are a covenant activity within the Godhead by which the relations of man to God are established. All the relation of God to temporal existence is accordingly a covenant relation.*⁷⁸

Although Van Til does not explicitly identify the eternal covenant as the *pactum* here, but only mentions the covenant generically, his language about the eternal covenant elsewhere must be sought to provide insight into his understanding of the trinitarian foundation of human history. Speaking of the ability of non-Christian Greek philosophers to posit ethical theories, Van Til says,

Yet it is certainly true that as the second person of the Trinity he was the Logos of creation. As the Logos of creation it was through him only that the Greeks could make their speculations. In this respect then we may say that as the second person of the Trinity Christ had heard of the Greek virtues before the Greeks had heard of them. In other words, it was because in the *pactum salutis* that Christ took it upon himself to save the world, *which would fall into sin and try in vain through its own ethics and its own virtues to save itself*, that he now put forth his righteousness as the foundation of the virtues of those who should be in him. The whole question of Jesus' being

⁷⁶ K. Scott Oliphint, *God With Us* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 106.

⁷⁷ Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed., Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980), 247. Cited in Oliphint, *God With Us*, 107.

⁷⁸ Van Til, "Trinity," *Unpublished Manuscripts*. Emphasis mine.

acquainted with or not being acquainted with Greek ethics is therefore beside the point.⁷⁹

That is, for Van Til, although it is within the sphere of the creating and sustaining work of the Logos that the Greeks were able to make ethical speculations, such an activity (a random particular in the history of the universe) was ordained, and derives its meaning, not primarily from the creative work of the Logos, but foremost as a stipulation put to the Son by the Father in the *pactum* before creation. Therefore, for Van Til, the *pactum* is the foundation of the meaning of facts – or, the engine of the function of the Logos as the *principium cognoscendi* for the human race.⁸⁰

2. The *Pactum Salutis* as the Rationale for Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace

The *pactum* was not only the foundation of human history for Van Til. It was the very center of his theological approach. Indeed, "unless one understands Van Til's affirmations with respect to the doctrine of common grace, one will inevitably move to unbiblical extremes."⁸¹ If such is the case, and I think it is, then if Van Til's underlying rationale for his doctrine of common grace is the *pactum*, then it may likewise be said that unless one understands Van Til's affirmations with respect to the *pactum*, one will misunderstand his doctrine of common grace. Van Til says as much, remarking, "for the solution of the problem of common grace, it is of basic importance to set it in the perspective of the Reformed view of history as a whole."⁸² So this leads to the question as to what the Reformed view of history is as a whole. Van Til clarifies,

History has, we believe as Christians, genuine significance because God's counsel is back of it and is being realized through it...Every historical generality is a stepping-stone toward the final particularism that comes at the climax of history...All the facts of history manifest

⁷⁹Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), 12-13. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁰This is not the same as Bavinck's interpretation of the Logos of John 1 functioning in a redemptive way before it functions in a generic, creative way, which thereby founds his implicit commonsense realism, as described in K. Scott Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism, the Logos Principle, and *Sola Scriptura*," *Westminster Theological Journal* (2010), 377-380, 386. For Bavinck, the function of the Logos as *principium cognoscendi* was less organic than the word implies, and less central than he professes. For Van Til, the prior redemptive function of the Logos is the mechanism by which it functions as *principium cognoscendi*, without making "Redeemer" a necessary property of the Son.

⁸¹K. Scott Oliphint, "Foreward," in *The Defense of the Faith*, by Cornelius Van Til, x.

⁸²Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 338.

something of the attitude of god to men. If they did not, they would not be related to God and, therefore, be meaningless.⁸³

In other words, the meaning of all historical and factual generalities are dependent on their *telos* – or, future purpose – which was ordained "before the creation of the world" (Titus 1:2). This means that knowledge is eschatologically rooted and eschatology is covenantally rooted. Even the history and facts of the creation event are eschatological, because for Van Til, the "final particularism that comes at the climax of history" is, he says only sentences earlier, "the redemption in Christ of the elect."⁸⁴

However, one might object that for Van Til, it is not the *pactum* which undergirds history, but simply God's election of some unto the covenant of grace, and that to import an intra-trinitarian covenantal notion into Van Til's theology of the eternal free action of God for the sake of the church is unwarranted, for he says, "[God] elected others because of the work that Christ would do for them and the Spirit would do within them *in history*."⁸⁵ Yet he rejects the collapsing of the *pactum* and the covenant of grace. Commenting on the error of New England Congregationalists, he says that "the stress on the covenant idea was one sided, in some cases perhaps tending to . . . an identification of the covenant of grace with the covenant of redemption."⁸⁶ In the same context of his rejection, he says,

As applied to the question of redemption, the covenant idea expresses the fact that the persons of the trinity made a compact between themselves with respect to the salvation, not merely of individuals but, of the human race as an organic whole...As applied to the whole question of the philosophy of history, the covenant idea places emphasis upon the unity of God's plan as apparent in the whole course of events. [That unity is that out] of all nations, and throughout all ages, God calls unto himself a people for his own possession and he makes all things work together for good on their behalf and, thus, to his own glory.⁸⁷

From the *pactum's* enterprise of "salvation . . . of the human race as an organic whole" flows a twofold division of the elect and the reprobate. These soteriological categories exist in the larger context of the *pactum*, and must therefore be understood as such. Specifically, in covenantal

⁸³Van Til, *Common Grace*, 31-33.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁵Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), 188-189. Cited by Van Til from an earlier version in *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008), 393.

⁸⁶Cornelius Van Til, "Review of The Covenant Idea in New England Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 8, no. 1 (1945), 108.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 107-108.

terms, reprobation is a stipulation put to the Father by the Son and election is a reward put to the Son by the Father. Having said that, Van Til speaks of the relationship between common grace, election, and reprobation.

The elect and the reprobate are by one act of response to that single proposition led closer to their distinctive destinations. To be sure, this is true only in view of later events, the chief of which is the redemption in Christ of the elect...Indeed, the reality of the 'common wrath' depends upon the fact of the earlier "common grace". But *after the common, in each case, comes the conditional*. History is a process of differentiation. Accordingly, the idea of that which is common between the elect and the reprobate is always a limiting concept. It is a commonness for *the time being*. There lies back of it a divine *as if*.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Van Til speaks of the relationship between an overarching philosophy of history, common grace, and election and reprobation as particulars of the *pactum*:

God's rain and sunshine comes, we know, to His creatures made in His image. It comes upon a sinful human race that they might be saved. It comes upon the non-believer that he might crucify to himself the Son of God afresh. *The facts of rain and sunshine*, so far from being no evidence of anything in themselves, *are evidences of all these things*, simultaneously and progressively.⁸⁹

It could not be clearer that the "these things" which are evidences "simultaneously and progressively" by the factuality of rain and sunshine (synecdochically speaking of all created facts), is God's plan of redemption. For Van Til, the previously mentioned eschatological meaning (and primary meaning) of creation is its subservient covenantal function within the *pactum* as a plane of accomplishment and differentiation of the stipulations and rewards of the *pactum*. So in the end, if the *pactum* of Van Til's theology is the engine of Christ's function as the *principium cognoscendi*, then common grace is the frame.

3. Necessity and Contingency in the Prelapsarian Order

Although Van Til would reject the Roman Catholic theology of the image of God, which is that Adam was created with the need for a *donum superadditum* in order for him to maintain his metaphysical image-

⁸⁸Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), 31, 74.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 95.

status,⁹⁰ a reading of his philosophy of history demonstrates that as history stands connected to the *pactum*, he would nevertheless say that on a level of first-order causes (divine decree) and second-order causes (created cause-and-effect), Adam was unable *not* to sin. That is, to say that there was a second-order variable in creation which would allow for the everlasting innocence of Adam is to deny the organic foundational relation that the *pactum* has to God's act of creation. It has already been demonstrated that for Van Til, the meaning of God's generous disposition toward mankind as a singular Adamic entity is a patient forbearance with the reprobate for the sake of the (yet) unregenerate elect. Van Til elucidates,

From the beginning God had in mind his ultimate plan with respect to the final differentiations between men. Both infra- and supralapsarians agree on this. But this did not reduce the favorable attitude toward mankind at the beginning of history. Why then should God's general favor not continue upon man even after the fall? *Only if sin were taken to be the act of a being that is itself ultimate would that be the case*. From eternity God rejected men because of the sin that they would do as *historical beings*.⁹¹

Here Van Til is saying that the debate between infra- and supralapsarians cannot be with regard to the eternity of the decree, but the relationship of the decree to second order variables. In other words, for Van Til, the debate between infra- and supralapsarians cannot be with regard to the eternity of the decree, but the relationship of the decree to second-order variables. The notion that God eternally decreed the *pactum* to save the elect from sin and condemn the reprobate through the death and resurrection of Christ, including that this was possible at a second-order level not to happen, is incompatible with both infra- and supralapsarianism. In this line of thinking, there is a non-arbitrary connection between the decrees and history. Since for Van Til, the *pactum* was God's impetus for creation, Adam could no sooner *not* sin at the event of the Serpent's temptation, than creation relapse into non-creation. This issue does not regard the doctrine of providence properly speaking, as if the point were merely to say that God's sovereignty precludes the possibility of real contingency – far from it. Rather, Van Til wants to ground the very notion of contingency in the irrevocable decree of God with regard to the *pactum's* differentiation of the elect and reprobate in history.

In other words, the *pactum* is a *sui generis* event in both first-order and second-order planes of causality because it is the only event that

⁹⁰Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 111, 177, 181-183.

⁹¹Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 188-189. Cited by Van Til from an earlier version in *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008), 393. Emphasis mine.

exists on both planes – that is, the *pactum* is both an eternal event and the first historical event, and it is because of the theologically elastic double-function of the *pactum* on both planes of causality that requires Adam's sin to be as necessary on the second-level as it is on the first-level. For Van Til, because the *pactum* was the covenantal rationale even for the existence of the prelapsarian order, and granting that divine does not undermine second-order causality, it was not possible in any theoretical sense for Adam not to have sinned. He says,

We have so far been discussing the nature of the trinitary existence and activity without relation to *actual history*. Not that actual history is excluded from the covenant. It is included as far as the plan of God is concerned, but not yet realized. Now important conclusions follow forthwith from this covenant relation within the Trinity. In the first place it means that since it is the divine essence that makes the covenant within itself with reference to creation, *all temporal events are forever certain*...The certainty of sin is therefore also included within the decrees of God. We may call it a permissive decree ...*but the certainty of it must in a way, mysterious indeed, still be connected with God's plan*. On the other hand the reality and vitality of the personal and therefore covenant relation within the Trinity, however unharmonizable it is for our logic, with the Oneness of the divine essence also forms the basis for a real freedom of the finite person. God can thus also enter into historical covenant relation with man, and have this relation be real and vital, giving to man a genuine free finite covenant personality. *The covenant relation is therefore the only relation in which the finite stands to the infinite, because the eternal persons of the divine Trinity stand to one another in covenant relation.*⁹²

The central phrase here is, "The certainty of sin . . . must in a way . . . be connected with God's plan." In other words, Van Til affirms that it is entirely appropriate to speak of contingency, human freedom, and responsibility as they are held in tension with the sovereignty of God. Yet since God's providence over creation is everywhere administrated underneath the higher covenantal purposes of the *pactum*, it is inappropriate to speak of the particulars of the basic structure of that eternal covenant as sharing any qualitative identity with the particulars of created history. Thus, Adam's decision to sin in Eden was an event which was fostered by creation, not as the Roman Catholic position posits, but quite the opposite, as relating the nature of creation – both Adam and his environment – to the *pactum*, as determinatively conducive to his choice to sin when presented with temptation, which God himself "permitted." Nevertheless, this permission was performed on a *secondary* level by

⁹²Van Til, "Covenant," *Unpublished Manuscripts*.

placing Adam's metaphysically conditioned person into a situation which never could have overcome the craftiness of the Serpent, whom God himself placed in the garden for Adam to judge.⁹³ And while this is all "mysterious indeed," for Van Til, it "must...be connected with God's plan" which itself constitutes and establishes "actual history."

Van Til makes this point even clearer when he says the very meaning of the event of Adam's sin is one which must initially be interpreted as an enterprise which is defeated by God through Christ; moreover, this defeat is the essential meaning and true significance of the first act of sin by Adam. Van Til says, "We have to speak *as if* sin would have destroyed the work of God. That was certainly its ethical intent. But we know that this was not an ultimate metaphysical possibility, for it was already from all eternity a part of the plan of God that sin should be defeated through the work of Christ."⁹⁴

Again, it is clear that for Van Til, from God's perspective the reason that sin would not triumph is not because of a generic conception of the absoluteness or omnipotence of God with relation to the finitude of sin, but because of the relationship which God's activity in prior history has to do with his eschatological activity in Christ. Again, Van Til says, "But to hold strictly to man's utter responsibility or sin and yet to the fact that it was God's ultimate intention that it should come into the world through man, requires that one think analogically. And thinking analogically is thinking concretely. It means thinking from the analogical system of truth revealed in Scripture."⁹⁵ And again,

To place the fall beyond the decree of God would be to bring the crucial point in the entire history of the race under the control of man. *Then what of his eternal covenant of peace?...* And what is more, [Geerhardus] Vos here speaks that anyone assuming the position that the fall, due to some independence in man, does not derive its certainty from God posits a second ground of things next to God.⁹⁶

⁹³"From the vantage point of God's purpose, Satan's advent in Eden with lying wonders and all deceivableness of unrighteousness is seen to be nothing less than a delivering over of the devil to man for judgment. The destiny of man to judge angels (cf., 1 Cor 6:2f) is not a later addendum to the agenda but a primal assignment . . . When he placed the tree of the knowing of good and evil in the midst of the garden, God was already setting the scene for the judgment drama . . . The blaspheming profane serpent must be trampled underfoot. This was the task which, by the Creator's appointment, lay at the threshold of man's historic mission." Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stick, 2006), 121.

⁹⁴Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed., William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2007), 46.

⁹⁵Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 183.

⁹⁶Van Til, "Girardeau on the Will," *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til*.

It is clear then that for Van Til, Adam's state in the prelapsarian order, however mysterious it may be, did not include the possibility of sin at both the level of God's eternal decree *and* the level of created cause-and-effect. It was necessary for Adam to sin in with respect to creation (although contingent with respect to God's own nature), yet he was held responsible. This is why Van Til speaks of the mystery of Adam's sin in the prelapsarian order. It is not mysterious that Adam sinned. It is mysterious how he is responsible. God decreed both that Adam sinned *and* that he would be responsible, yet Van Til occupies himself primarily with the relationship of Adam's action *per se* to the decree of God and does not give substantial attention to how Adam is responsible. This is because for Van Til, the organic and meaningful historical connection between the *pactum* and Adam's sin is a necessary component of his theology of common grace.

To tie all of this together, Van Til makes the point that the notion of redemption is present at every point in God's interaction with creation. Rather than being peripheral then, it functions as the governing motivation for God's decrees and plan being what they are. Van Til says, "There is a history in the revelation of God's names...Especially should we expect this in connection with the development of the 'special principle,' the principle of redemption...*This process of God's naming himself is itself a part of the process of the special principle.*"⁹⁷ So for Van Til, the very activity of naming itself – of God making himself known to Adam – is merely "a part" of his *redemptive plan*.

VII. CONCLUSION

It will be helpful to close with a succinct comment on the Barth-Van Til relationship by Bruce McCormack:

Barth's doctrine of God is Christologically controlled while Van Til's doctrine of God controls his Christology . . . Van Til had a pre-modernist sense of confidence that the rationality that is proper to God's eternal counsel and plan was somehow embedded in the natural order as well as in the flow of history. Barth regarded such confidence as belonging to a world which no longer existed.⁹⁸

While debate over Van Til's theology will surely continue – and much more over Barth (and hopefully their commonalities and differences) – it is helpful to note the differences between Van Til on the one side and Barth and Balthasar on the other: in agreement with McCormack, the former's Christology was rooted in the ontological trinity while the

⁹⁷Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 320.

⁹⁸Bruce McCormack, "Afterword," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 380.

latter's trinitarian theology was rooted in Christology. This difference allows us to perceive in a unique way that in terms of understanding Van Til's covenantal theology, (1) the *ousia* and the *hypostases* of the trinity are equally ultimate, (2) the ontological trinity and the economic trinity are rigidly distinct, and finally (3) the foundation of history (even the prelapsarian order) is the *pactum salutis*.