

**Pressing Toward The Mark:
Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC**
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Apologetics gave birth to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and continues to be its legacy and reputation. The modernism of the early twentieth century was not simply a theological variant within historic Christianity, not merely a new version of Christian doctrine which retained at its center the *evangel*. It was, according to J. Gresham Machen's analysis in *Christianity and Liberalism*,^[1] a departure from the Christian religion altogether, abandoning the proclamation of the supernaturalistic good news of redemption which had distinguished the Christian church throughout history. Liberalism was simply another religion or philosophy of man in competition with the historic biblical faith. Accordingly, the battle with modernism was more than "polemical theology" against an exegetically weak or inconsistent school of evangelical Christianity. It was *apologetics* with unbelief.^[2]

Apologetics and the OPC

Machen's confrontation with modernism and broad churchmanship at Princeton Theological Seminary and within the Presbyterian Church in the USA - which in time gave rise to both Westminster Theological Seminary (1929) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936)^[3] - was thus apologetical in nature. Both institutions were founded in the effort to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Accordingly, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* states: "evangelical Christianity in the Western world owes a large debt to Machen and to the organizations he founded for their intelligent and courageous explanation of and stand for historical Christian truth."^[4]

Apologetics was used, then, in the providence of God to bring about the Orthodox Presbyterian Church fifty years ago. Throughout its half century the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has retained a reputation for apologetics. This reputation has been tied, not only to the interests and requirements of its ministers, evangelists, and teachers,^[5] but especially to the scholarly careers of two leading professors at Westminster Theological Seminary who were Orthodox Presbyterian ministers: Machen himself (who died in 1937) and Cornelius Van Til (who retired in 1973).

It can be said without partisan prejudice that preeminence in the twentieth-century defense of biblical faith belongs to the labors of Machen and Van Til - the former in historical studies, the latter in philosophical studies, as they interfaced with Christian theology. Dr. Clarence Edward Macartney said of Machen: "he was the greatest theologian and defender of the Christian faith that the church of our day has produced."[\[6\]](#) About Van Til *Christianity Today* said: "Cornelius Van Til wanted to be a farmer.... Instead he became one of the foremost Christian apologists of our time."[\[7\]](#)

So then, to understand and appreciate the outlook, history, and ministry of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church - even more so than Westminster Theological Seminary [\[8\]](#) - one needs to be familiar (if not sympathetic) with the theological perspective, apologetical distinctives, and scholarly efforts of J. Gresham Machen and Cornelius Van Til. It has been Machen and Van Til who, as theologians and apologists, have given the denomination its early bearing and character.[\[9\]](#) As a social group the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has a self-conception and mindset which are rooted in, and will continue to develop in interaction with, the distinctive stances assumed by Machen and Van Til in their teaching and publishing ministries.

A House Divided?

These introductory observations bring us to an engaging question. If the intellectual identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is tied up with the perspective and influence of both Machen and Van Til, is not the denomination a house philosophically divided against itself? William White honestly asks, "Did Machen understand how far from the old Princeton apologetic the new Westminster apologetic really was?"[\[10\]](#) Others would turn that into a *rhetorical* question. To many people, anyway, it has seemed that the apologetical approach taken by Machen was conceptually at odds with the presuppositional methodology subsequently advanced by Van Til. In the thinking of such individuals Machen's empirical tendencies do not comport readily with Van Til's philosophical peculiarities. The heritage in apologetics bequeathed by these two Christian scholars, we are told, lacks inner harmony - like a conceptual dissonant chord.

There is no doubt about this much: Machen and Van Til certainly manifested different scholarly specializations and developed different emphases in their publications. Machen labored over detailed historical challenges to the Christian faith, paramount illustrations being *The Origin of Paul's Religion*[\[11\]](#) and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* [\[12\]](#) - whereas Van Til strove to counter the broader, underlying philosophical challenges mounted against the Christian understanding of reality, knowledge, or ethics, as exemplified in his books, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*[\[13\]](#) and *Christianity and Idealism*[\[14\]](#) Machen waxed eloquent about the historical foundation of faith: "Christian piety must be grounded firmly in historical knowledge."[\[15\]](#) Van Til argued that historical knowledge has philosophical preconditions which in themselves drive one to Christian faith: "the conflict between those who believe in historic Christianity and those who do not cannot

be carried by a discussion of 'facts' without at the same time discussing the philosophy of fact";^[16] "one has to go back of the 'facts' of history to a discussion of the meaning of history."^[17]

The intellectual temperaments, preparation, and interests of Machen and Van Til likewise led them in different directions. Machen was fascinated and absorbed with the particulars of classical philology and ancient history, while not feeling at ease in the rarified atmosphere of philosophical speculation. As a student, Machen distinguished himself in classics, but once relayed to his older brother, Arthur, an offer of "\$1,000 for a satisfactory exegesis of a single page" of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.^[18] On the other hand, Van Til's preparation and doctoral work were devoted, not to the details of empirical science or historical study, but precisely to the broader and intellectually necessary issues of philosophy; therefore he mastered, as a candidate at Princeton University, the complete works of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel in their original languages. He later wrote about the fact that historical investigation bolstered the work of apologetics, but added this autobiographical note: "I do not personally do a great deal of this because my colleagues in the other departments of the Seminary in which I teach are doing it better than I could do it."^[19]

The critical claim goes beyond what we have recognized here, though. It maintains that Machen was a practitioner of the "Old Princeton" approach to apologetics^[20] against which Van Til took a decided stand as a professor at Westminster Seminary.^[21] If that premise is substantially accurate, then some of Van Til's deepest reservations and most critical comments about the traditional method of apologetics fostered at (old) Princeton Seminary would prove to be against Machen himself - creating, in perspective and procedure, a momentous parting of the ways between the two apologists. In essence, Van Til would have been correcting the methods of Machen^[22] and striving to replace them with a presuppositional approach alien to Machen's thinking. Their contributions to the defense of the historical Christian faith are not simply different from each other, then, but are at diametric odds with each other. Van Til's work would not complement that of Machen, but stand in fundamental conflict with it. The "apologetic tradition" of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church would actually turn out, in that case, to be *two separate* traditions standing over against each other. Many think (at least on first appearance) that this is the actual state of affairs. I do not.^[23]

It would be anachronistic and undiscerning, of course, to hold that Machen completely anticipated and clearly expressed the very same transcendental, presuppositional challenge in apologetics as did Van Til, who merely perpetuated it after Machen. Van Til's distinctive philosophical contribution and significant step forward in self-conscious, apologetical methodology cannot be trivialized. Likewise, one cannot forget the immense admiration and commitment Machen had for the grand theological reputation of Princeton Seminary, with its stalwart professors famous for their propounding and defending of Calvinism as the truth of God, the purest and best exposition of the gospel. Machen was indebted to this intellectual tradition, openly identifying himself with the outlook and scholarship of B. B. Warfield^[24] and Francis L. Patton, the first professor in the

chair of "the Relations of Philosophy and Science to the Christian Religion" and later seminary president, with whom Machen had a particularly close (and mutually supportive) relationship.[25] When the apologetics chair created for Patton was vacated in 1892, it was assumed by William Brenton Greene, Jr., who served both as Machen's instructor and later as his supportive colleague in the seminary and presbytery.[26] It could be expected, therefore, that the attitude, concerns, and argumentation of Machen would bear a close resemblance to that of his Princeton predecessors - making it understandable (though too simplistic) that, not only might his *theology*[27] and his *empirical* concern with evidences[28] be readily identified with theirs, but his *conception of apologetics* as well.

The situation was far more intricate than that. While not coming to a fully and systematically worked-out understanding of presuppositional epistemology - much less shifting fields from his area of historical expertise to philosophical defense of the faith (which presuppositionalism would not have required of him anyway) - Machen does seem, in a manner unlike his Princeton mentors, to have recognized and appreciated that the insights of presuppositionalism were the consistent and self-conscious end of thinking which is true to Reformed theology. Personal experience and scholarly reflection brought him to a conception of apologetics - and of his own continuing work in historical defense - which was an advance over old Princeton in various ways and a corrective to some of its weakest philosophical distinctives. His own perspective on, and pursuit of, defending the faith were much more presuppositional than we would expect from someone who conformed exactly to the old Princeton outlook.[29] In short, because Machen moved away from the old Princeton conception of apologetics in a presuppositional direction, Van Til could applaud and support his historical defense of the faith, even as Machen could appreciate and approve of the developments in methodology and philosophical defense by Van Til. Any minor incongruities between (and even within) their two scholarly efforts do not belie the basic harmony of perspective which runs through them both.

Some Relevant History

Rehearsing some history relevant to Machen and Van Til would lead us to anticipate that evaluation.[30] Eleven years after Van Til's birth, Machen joined the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary (1906). It was during Van Til's teenage and college years that Machen became known as someone who stood for the intelligent defense of the historic Christian faith, publishing such engaging articles (among others) as "Jesus and Paul," "Christianity and Culture," and "History and Faith." [31] The year Van Til entered Calvin Theological Seminary (1921), Machen's first major book and apologetical masterpiece, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, came off the press, elevating Machen in the esteem of all who sought a Christianity capable of scholarly defense. Impressed with the noble faculty of Princeton Seminary (Machen, Vos, C. W. Hodge, Wilson) and the international prestige of the University (with A. A. Bowman the head of the philosophy department), Van Til transferred there the next year (1922), eventually earning the Th.M. from the seminary in 1925 and the Ph.D. from the university in 1927.

During those five intellectually intense years he came to know and respect Machen, on a personal basis especially while a seminary student, living on the same floor with Machen in Alexander Hall.[32] This time of contact between Van Til and Machen was a momentous period in the latter's career. He published two major works important to the apologetical setting of the time, *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923 and *What is Faith?*[33] in 1925. He constantly wrote on themes of apologetical significance: "Is Christianity True?" (1923), "The God of the Early Christians" (1924), "The Modern Use of the Bible" (1925), "The Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy" (1926), "Is the Bible Right About Jesus?" (1927)[34]. Also he often preached fervently in defense of the faith as stated supply (1923-1924) in the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton.[35] Public focus during Van Til's seminary years was on events which would embroil Machen in theological and ecclesiastical controversy; e.g., on Fosdick's notorious address, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" (1922), on the signing of the "Auburn Affirmation" (1923).

In light of Van Til's admiration for Machen,[36] Machen's personal proximity, and the obvious bearing of Machen's scholarship on Van Til's chosen interest in apologetics, it is unreasonable to think Van Til could be aware of Machen's position and the details of his method of defense. Given Van Til's brilliance, it is unreasonable to think he did not understand them.

It turns out that at the same time Van Til was making an equally strong impression on Machen. Van Til entered Princeton as a middler,[37] having already studied under W. H. Jellema and reading the Dutch works of Kuyper. Could Machen have missed this in his personal contacts and conversations with the Christian Reformed transfer student from Calvin Seminary? (After all, during Machen's own years as a seminary student, his esteemed mentor, B. B. Warfield, published a critical discussion of Kuyper's view of apologetics.)[38] Van Til's philosophical prowess became readily apparent to his Princeton professors, more particularly by his writing the prize-winning student papers for both 1923 (on evil and theodicy) and for 1924 (on the will and its theological relations), as well as by his taking simultaneous philosophy courses at the University each semester (with Machen hearing of A. A. Bowman's high praise for his competence in metaphysics).

Two months before the granting of his doctorate, Van Til published in *The Princeton Theological Review* a discussion of A. N. Whitehead's Lowell lectures for 1926, *Religion in the Making*. [39] The review clearly contained those lines of thought for which Van Til's presuppositional analysis has come to be recognized throughout the years. Van Til introduced his foil, significantly (especially in the old Princeton setting), as someone who "seeks to apply the scientific method to religion." Crucial to his own approach, Van Til laid bare his opponent's presupposition: "experience and the history of experience is his starting point." The prevailing sin of unbelieving philosophy was criticized: "the great line of distinction between God and man is effaced"; i.e., no adequate Creator/creature distinction. Van Til complained that God is, then, subjected to man's

own autonomous judgment: "the Good is higher than God... This accords strictly with his starting point which regards the moral consciousness as the judge of religion." But autonomous philosophy is not equal to such a task, internally suffering from its own dialectical tensions, according to Van Til. Whitehead posited process (change) as the basic feature of reality, trying "to get order and system out of this moving whole" by reference to God. This is impossible, Van Til observed, since Whitehead's philosophy already "implies that God is subject to the conditions of the world." Having offered an internal critique of the unbeliever's thought, Van Til finally pointed to the only viable alternative. The Christian philosopher does not face Whitehead's major problem because the biblical God is both transcendent and personal, "the self-sufficient creator" of the historic particulars (i.e., the source of both order and change). Van Til's conclusion rings with the kind of note which is famous in his apologetical efforts: "Theism makes God the source of possibility; only thus can the transcendence as well as the immanence of God be maintained; only thus is God qualitatively distinct from man; only thus is He personal; only thus is He God."[\[40\]](#) So then, from Van Til's very first published article his presuppositional direction of thought was manifest for all to see.

The following year (1928) Princeton Seminary invited Van Til to take a leave from his new pastorate and serve the seminary as an instructor in apologetics - quite an honor, making him the youngest member of the faculty. His friendly and godly hero, "Das" Machen, was pleased with the development and maintained a close personal relation with Van Til and his wife during that year.[\[41\]](#) These words from a letter to his mother on September 25, 1928, leave no doubt about Machen's endorsement of Van Til:

The best piece of news for some time is that Mr. Van Til, a recent graduate of the Seminary, has, despite Dr. Stevenson's vigorous opposition, been asked by the Directors' Curriculum Committee to teach the classes in Apologetics during this year, *and has accepted*. It is the first real forward step that has been taken in some time. Van Til is excellent material from which a professor might ultimately be made.[\[42\]](#)

In January 1929, Van Til published a review of two books by Bavinck, insisting that we must abandon the impossible notion of a "neutral territory" of truth or study - making necessary schools which are self-consciously Christian in starting point and goal[\[43\]](#) - "if we would truly employ all the means given us for the propagation and defense of the faith."[\[44\]](#) One of the cherished assumptions and touted ideals of the old Princeton approach to apologetics could not be accepted by Van Til. That was open for all to see, and Machen had excellent perception.

In May of 1926, the board of directors for Princeton Theological Seminary had extended to Machen a call to the Stuart Professorship of Apologetics and Christian Ethics, which he accepted after some hesitation (especially over transferring from the New Testament department). In the throes of the political fight over reorganization of the seminary, though, Machen came to doubt the wisdom of his acceptance.[45] On June 20, 1928, he requested permission from the board to withdraw his previous acceptance, which it did. Who then could take Machen's place? The overwhelming approval of Van Til's work in apologetics could not have been more forcefully expressed by the board of Princeton Seminary[46] than by what it did in the spring of 1929 - electing Van Til, after but one year of teaching, to occupy the very chair of apologetics which Machen had turned down! On May 12 "Machen expressed his intense gratification at this development, speaking of Van Til's special equipment for the work and his great success with the students." [47] From this it is evident that Machen was conscious of, interested in, and personally applauded the character and quality of Van Til's apologetical teaching.

On June 14, 1929, Machen communicated his determination not to teach under the reorganized board of Princeton Seminary.[48] He was joined in this by Van Til. When plans were pursued that summer to establish Westminster Seminary, Machen had his own opportunity to seek the very kind of man in apologetics he wanted. We can be sure Machen recognized how crucial and determinative this position would be, especially in light of the "purpose and plan" for the new seminary which Machen propounded at its opening exercises: notably, "we believe that the Christian religion welcomes and is capable of scholarly defense." He considered no one else to be as suited and qualified to do the work desired than Van Til. There was no doubt in his mind about the choice. Machen was so determined to have Van Til be the apologist at Westminster that, when Van Til initially declined the invitation (even after a visit from O. T. Allis to plead the cause), in August Machen himself traveled to Spring Lake, Michigan, to use all his influence and persuasion to change Van Til's mind - like Farel pleading with Calvin to come to Geneva, Van Til recalls.[49] In September Van Til joined the faculty, being asked to teach the same course material he had advanced at Princeton earlier (including an elective in the history of metaphysics). It is manifest from what transpired, then, that neither Machen nor Van Til found irreconcilable differences with each other's own conceptions and practice of apologetics. They both made well thought out decisions to labor together.

There was plenty of opportunity over the next few years to understand even further the nature and practice of one another's apologetical scholarship. Van Til would read Machen's stirring 1932 address: "The Importance of Christian Scholarship," [50] and hear Machen's famous radio talks in 1935 which were published as *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*[51] and *The Christian View of Man*. In 1933 Van Til developed and clearly set forth his transcendental, presuppositional apologetic in his first major syllabus at Westminster, *Metaphysics of Apologetics*. [52] The distinctive tack taken by his presuppositional apologetic finds its finest and earliest statement right here. He reflected critically on the empirical approach to religious truth in the syllabus, *Psychology of Religion*. Very importantly, Van Til produced in 1935, not only his quintessential statement of presuppositionalism which appears in the syllabus entitled *Christian Apologetics*, but also the

syllabus with most direct relevance to the Old Princeton method of apologetics, *Evidences*. All of these written studies, which abundantly advertised the presuppositional character and method of defending the faith, were produced and discussed in the presence of Machen, a man who was consumed with enthusiasm for Christianity's defense. He surely took note of the accomplishments and teaching of his chosen professor for apologetics. Prior to Machen's death, Van Til also published a large number of magazine pieces, including some twenty articles or reviews of important religious and philosophical books in the very periodicals which Machen himself helped to establish, finance, and edit: *Christianity Today* and the *Presbyterian Guardian*.^[53] At one point Machen and Van Til enjoyed a two-day train trip together in which they talked at length with each other about apologetic method.

Therefore, Machen was hardly in the dark as to Van Til's point of view and method,^[54] and Van Til could not have been ignorant of Machen's. The scholarship and argumentation of these two apologists, who had known each other for so long, could not have slipped the attention of each other. Nor can we credibly suppose that either of them lacked the requisite scholarly powers to realize what the other was contending. Given their joint and eager dedication to apologetical work, they would have been especially interested in the bearing of each other's line of thinking on their own labors. And given their non-too-shy commitment to matters of principle and importance, we cannot believe they would have swept any fundamental ideological conflict under the rug.

So then, our short rehearsal and integration of relevant details in their career exhibits, from the very fact that Machen and Van Til chose to minister and teach together, that neither of them found in the apologetic propounded by the other any root hostility to his own. William White justly records: "It is a known fact that Machen, as far as he comprehended it, fully endorsed Van Til's thinking and gave it his hearty and unqualified backing."^[55] If the two master apologists themselves did not perceive tension between their two approaches, it would seem a high-minded and precarious course for students of them to pursue some fundamental conflict between them.

The Objective Proof of Christian Theism

The temptation to suggest incompatibility between Machen and Van Til springs, it seems, from harboring misleading assumptions about Van Til's view of such tools as empirical evidence and theistic proofs in defending the faith,^[56] if not from an equally misconceived notion of what Machen felt about them as well. These misrepresentations cannot be justified in light of the published works of Machen and Van Til, but arise from faulty preconceptions of what their positions must imply and from inadequate familiarity with their teaching.^[57] To take just one of the many available illustrations, Clark Pinnock has portrayed Van Til as maintaining that "it is not only useless, but wrong, to appeal to theistic arguments or historical vindications in defense of the Christian faith: standing over against Van Til, he thinks, Pinnock teaches that "a philosophy of Christian evidences which employs theistic argument and historical evidence is needed lest the

gospel be discredited as a grand and unwarranted assumption." [58] Efforts must be made, then, to clarify and explain the matter, [59] looking first at the issue of theistic proofs and second at the issue of empirical evidences for Christianity.

We should begin by observing that Van Til's criticism of the "theistic proofs" has always and only been directed against the proofs as they were traditionally formulated, understood, and applied. Such proofs have erroneously suggested that (1) the evidence for God's existence is ambiguous (so that there is some excuse for denying it or holding that it is only probably true), (2) that there are matters which are epistemologically more certain than God (from which one then moves on to prove, with less certainty, God's existence), (3) that the unbeliever's espoused presuppositions about reality and knowledge are sufficient to account for the intelligibility of his experience and reasoning (so that he has every philosophical right to question God's existence on his own terms), (4) that unregenerate men can be intellectually neutral and open-mindedly fair about this subject (rather than unrighteously and self-deceptively suppressing the truth), and (5) that the "god" which can be rationally proven may or may not be the God of the Christian Scriptures (since we deal only with isolated truth-claims, one by one, not an all-embracing worldview). In addition to the internal, philosophical flaws with the traditional formulations of a theistic proof, [60] Van Til finds these preceding assumptions to be theologically and philosophically unacceptable. Paul taught in Romans 1:18-22 that the very living and true God in all of his eternal power and divine character (contrary to 5) is so clearly and inescapably revealed in man's experience (contrary to 2) that they all know God, and there is absolutely no excuse for denying it (contrary to 1); nevertheless, all men strive to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (contrary to 4) and end up becoming vain and foolish in their reasoning (contrary to 3). For instance, they presuppose that all events are random ("chance," freedom), and then turn around and insist on rigid explanation by means of scientific laws (order, necessity); they presuppose that there is nothing but matter in motion (materialism), and then turn around and call for adherence to the (non-materialistic) laws of logic.

Van Til realizes that there is no natural theology, if we mean that according to Romans 1 the created realm simply provides uninterpreted raw data which merely makes possible, provided men rationally reflect upon it correctly, a natural knowledge of God as the eventual conclusion of their reasoning. From the epistemological side, there is no uninterpreted sense data ("no brute facts"); and from the metaphysical side, there is no logic free of commitment to some view of reality ("no neutrality"). Theologically, men do not naturally interpret their experience of nature in such a way as to reach and affirm correct conclusions about God. About the natural man, who "cannot know" the things of God's Spirit (1 Cor 2:14), Paul said "there is none who seeks after God" (Rom 3:11). In that case we should not really speak of natural theology, but rather of a "natural atheology." Until men are driven to abandon their intellectual autonomy and to think in terms of the truth of God as their point of reference, they will never read the evidence properly for God's existence, but Van Til adds, neither will they be able to make sense of any area of their experience. The theistic proofs should not, therefore, cater to man's pretended autonomy. [61] It is important to stress the "basic difference between a theistic proof that presupposes God and one that presupposes man as ultimate." [62]

Van Til's apologetic is based upon confidence in natural revelation, for Romans 1 teaches that the created order is a conduit of constant, inescapable, pre-interpreted information about God, so that all men already possess an actual knowledge of him at the very outset of their reasoning about anything whatsoever, a knowledge which makes possible their use of evidence and reason. Van Til asserts that "the revelation of God to man is so clear that it has absolute compelling force objectively, "and from that standpoint "I do not reject 'the theistic proofs' but merely insist on formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture."[\[63\]](#) Natural revelation is crucial to the formulation of proof for God's existence: "God's revelation is everywhere, and everywhere perspicuous. Hence the theistic proofs are absolutely valid. They are but the restatement of the revelation of God."[\[64\]](#)

Far from rejecting theistic proof, Van Til insists upon it, and in fact insists upon a very strong version thereof: "The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectively valid. We should not tone down the validity of this argument to the probability level... Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold."[\[65\]](#) If men will not intellectually acknowledge that they know and must presuppose God, their attempts to reason and interpret experience (on some other espoused presupposition) cannot be made intelligible. Thus Van Til states his proof quite concisely and forcefully: "The only 'proof' of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of 'proving' anything at all."[\[66\]](#) In short Van Til's approach is to challenge unbelievers in the words of Paul: "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor 1:20; cf. Rom 1:21).

If the debate with unbelievers comes down in principle to a conflict over ultimate presuppositions which control all other reasoning and interpretation, though, does not all use of rational argumentation cease? According to Van Til, not at all. This was the whole point of chapter XIV in *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*. It opened by saying "the question that comes up at once is whether it is then of any use to argue about the Christian theistic position at all with those who are of contrary convictions" (p. 183). Van Til forcefully refutes the notion that it is useless for the regenerate to reason with the unregenerate, insisting that we must. "It is exactly because of our deep conviction that God is one and truth is therefore one, that we hold that there is only one type of argument for all men" (p. 198). We must not abandon rational debate with the unbeliever: "we cannot choose epistemologies as we choose hats... [as if] the whole thing is but a matter of taste"; rather, those who hold antithetical presuppositions "ought to be refuted by a reasoned argument, instead of by ridicule and assumption" (pp. xiv, 23). Christian commitment is not intellectually ungrounded: "Faith is not blind faith... Christianity can be shown to be, not 'just as good as' or even 'better than' the non-Christian position, but the only position that does not make nonsense of human experience."[\[67\]](#) Van Til does not permit the argument for the truth of Christianity to be washed out into subjectivism: "There is objective evidence in abundance and it is sufficiently clear. Men ought, if only they reasoned rightly, to come to the conclusion that God exists. That is to say,

if the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is objectively valid, whatever the attitude of those to whom it comes may be."[\[68\]](#)

Elsewhere Van Til is decidedly critical of the "fideistic attitude [which] comes to expression frequently in the statement of the experiential proof of the truth of Christianity. People will say that they know that they are saved and that Christianity is true no matter what the philosophical or scientific evidence for or against it may be.... But, in thus seeking to withdraw from all intellectual argument, such fideists have virtually admitted the validity of the argument against Christianity. They will have to believe in their hearts what they have virtually allowed to be intellectually indefensible."[\[69\]](#) His commitment to a reasoned apologetic, rather than blind authority, is manifest: "It might seem that there can be no argument between them. It might seem that the orthodox view of authority is to be spread only by testimony and by prayer, not by argument. But this would militate directly against the very foundation of all Christian revelation."[\[70\]](#) This brief discussion demonstrates how terribly misinformed is Montgomery's criticism that Van Til's apologetic "gives the unbeliever the impression that our gospel is as a prioristically, fideistically irrational as the presuppositional claims of its competitors."[\[71\]](#)

Since the argument with the unbeliever is finally over those presuppositions which control all other reasoning and interpretation, what kind of argument can be rationally employed? It will be an argument regarding the preconditions of all intelligible experience, logic, science, ethics, etc. - an argument "from the impossibility of the contrary."[\[72\]](#) For this one must use the indirect method of argument: "The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to 'facts' or 'laws' whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the 'facts' and 'laws' intelligible."[\[73\]](#) To settle that question, Van Til continues, the believer and unbeliever must "for arguments's sake" place themselves on each other's position to see what their respective outworkings are regarding the intelligibility of facts and laws. Van Til put it this way in his first syllabus:

The Reformed method of argument is first constructive. It presents the biblical view positively by showing that all factual and logical discussions by men take place by virtue of the world's being what God in Christ says it is. It then proceeds negatively to show that unless all facts and all logical relations be seen in the light of the Christian framework, all human interpretation fails instantly. It fails instantly in principle.[\[74\]](#)

When we turn from "theistic proof" to the subject of scientific and historical evidences for the Christian faith, we again see how far off the mark Van Til's critics have been. Montgomery misrepresents him as presenting the unbeliever "with an a priori dogmatic" instead of "the factually compelling evidence for the Christian truth-claim," and Pinnock alleges that Van Til "refuses to have anything to do with ... rational arguments and empirical demonstrations." To hear them, one is led to believe Van Til would "recoil from" presenting verifying evidence for the faith and "dismiss [the unbeliever's] questions without a hearing."[\[75\]](#) The actual truth is that Van Til does not in the slightest reject the proper use of inductive reasoning and empirical evidences in apologetics.

Listen to what Van Til says about the phenomena of Scripture:

The point is, we are told, that in an infallible Bible there should not be any discrepancies. There should be no statement of historical fact in Scripture that is contradictory to a statement of historical fact given elsewhere. Yet higher criticism has in modern times found what it thinks are facts that cannot possibly be harmonized with the idea of an infallible Bible. What shall be the attitude of the orthodox believer with respect to this? Shall he be an obscurantist and hold to the doctrine of the authority of the Scripture though he knows that it can empirically be shown to be contrary to the facts of Scripture themselves? It goes without saying that such should not be his attitude.[\[76\]](#)

The presuppositionalist is not allergic to employing empirical, inductive study according to the scientific method - just the opposite:

It is quite commonly held that we cannot accept anything that is not the result of a sound scientific methodology. With this we can as Christians heartily agree. ...The Christian position is certainly not opposed to experimentation and observation.[\[77\]](#)

Depreciation of [the] sense world inevitably leads to a depreciation of many of the important facts of historic Christianity which took place in the sense world. The Bible does not rule out every form of empiricist any more than it rules out every form of *a priori* reasoning.[\[78\]](#)

The greater amount of detailed study and the more carefully such study is undertaken, the more truly Christian will the method be. It is important to bring out this point in order to help remove the common misunderstanding that Christianity is opposed to factual investigation.... The difference between the prevalent method of science and the method of Christianity is not that the former is interested in finding the facts and is ready to follow the facts wherever they may lead, while the latter is not ready to follow the facts.[79]

Such affirmations by Van Til fully comport with presuppositional thinking and method: they are not out of character or inconsistent with the system as a whole. "Evidentialist" critics might jump back with the challenge, "Why, then, does Van Til rule out the historical argument for the resurrection!" The question displays the blinding effect of preconceptions again, for just listen to Van Til's own words: "Historical apologetics is absolutely necessary and indispensable to point out that Christ rose from the grave, etc." [80] Not only is it indispensable in general, Van Til says of himself in particular: "I would therefore engage in historical apologetics." [81] The plain and simple fact is that, from the very start, Van Til's presuppositionalism has not been antagonistic to - or meant as a substitute for - evidences and empirical reasoning in support of the historic Christian faith. He has always had tremendous confidence in them: "Every bit of historical investigation, whether it be in the directly biblical field, archeology, or in general history is bound to confirm the truth of the claims of the Christian position.... A really fruitful historical apologetic argues that every fact is and must be such as proves the truth of the Christian theistic position." [82]

As was discussed above, Van Til lays strong emphasis upon natural revelation in his apologetic. Since he takes that to be a clear communication from God through the facts of nature and history, one which leaves men guilty for rebelling against God, it is altogether consistent that Van Til endorses the work of scientists and historians in offering verification for the claims of the Christian faith. It is of particular value in, first, strengthening the confidence of believers and, second, embarrassing unbelievers in their criticisms against the Bible's scientific and historical claims. Evidences offer God's children the answers they need so as not to be intellectually troubled when hearing the learned objections of non-Christian scholars. Evidences can also silence the futile empirical objections of unbelievers to the claims of Christianity, if not also "clearing away the mental debris" of intellectual prejudice (e.g., "only anti-scientific, emotional superstition could lead some one to believe biblical claims") so that unbelievers can better hear and consider the message of Scripture.

As indispensable and valuable as they are, though, it would be a misleading conception to think that evidences can stand on their own in Christian apologetics. This should be obvious enough from what God's word teaches us. (1) What people will think about the observed evidence is affected by non-observational beliefs (e.g., Matt 28:12-13, 17; Luke 24:16, 31; John 21:12). (2) In dealing with the claims of Christ, nobody is truly detached and uncommitted one way or another:

"No man can serve two masters He who is not with me is against me" (Matt 6:24; 23:30). What one presupposition sees as foolish, the other sees as wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-25). (3) The non-observational commitments of the unbeliever (e.g., Ps 10:4; Rom 1:25; 3:11-12) are objectively foolish and lead to the destruction of knowledge (Prov 1:22,29; Rom 1:21-22; 1 Tim 6:20) because "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7; cf. Ps 36:9). (4) All men inescapably have an inner knowledge of God (Gen 1:27; Rom 1:20-21; 2:15), the One whose sovereign power and plan uphold the universe with regularity (Gen 8:22; Jer 31:35; Heb 1:3; Ps 33:11; Acts 15:18; Dan 4:35), "working all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph 1:11). (5) Yet unbelievers are deeply hostile to this knowledge and "suppress it in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18-21), preferring to walk in the vanity of their minds and darkened understanding (Eph 4:17-18). (6) That explains why it is that, regarding such empirical evidence as the resurrection, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31; cf. 24:25-26). (7) Nevertheless, the objective revelation provided by God in the evidence of history and Scripture is such that we can through the resurrection "know for certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36; Luke 1:4 says we can "know the certainty of the things" in which we have been instructed, and cf. 1 John 2:3, "we know that we know").

To Van Til's epistemological credit, then, he has recognized throughout his scholarly career, not only the many detailed errors in the outworking of the non-presuppositional (traditional) arguments from inductive evidence (say, for the resurrection),[\[83\]](#) but more fundamentally the philosophical and theological truths (corresponding to the above list) that: (1) all empirical observation is inescapably theory-laden (there are no uninterpreted "brute facts"). (2) The acceptance and interpretation of what one takes as "factual" is not determined by sense perception alone, but in interaction with one's fundamental philosophical convictions (there is no presuppositionless neutrality). (3) Empirical, inductive study in itself has certain preconditions which can be intelligibly accounted for only on the presupposition of Christianity (so that scientific and historical study wittingly or unwittingly assumes what believers are defending). (4) What is assumed by the consistently non-Christian understanding of empiricism and induction[\[84\]](#) contradicts biblical teaching as well as rendering empirical, inductive reasoning impossible in philosophical principle. (5) Unbelievers (like believers) are not at all unbiased, impartial, without motive and goal, completely open-minded, and purely disinterested in where they will be led by their handling of the empirical evidence. (6) If the unbeliever's espoused presuppositions are not challenged, and if he holds tenaciously and consistently to them, he can for very good reason refuse to be driven from his position by consideration of empirical evidences alone.[\[85\]](#) (7) Likewise, because the believer's intellectual basis for certainty[\[86\]](#) about the claims of the Christian faith is broader than his (admittedly) limited and fallible reflections upon the (admittedly) incomplete pool of available empirical indicators alone - which would, if all by itself, require humble and mitigated conclusions - those claims (even about history and nature) should not merely be considered or presented as probably true.[\[87\]](#)

In line with these insights Van Til states: "For any fact to be a fact at all it must be a revelational fact."[\[88\]](#) By thus repudiating the idea of "brute fact" Van Til precludes an essential element of the traditional, non-presuppositional approach to evidentialist apologetics, which holds that the objects of perception carry no inherent meaning or interpretation and can be approached in a neutral fashion, without man's mind assuming any meaning or interpretation. In that case the "facts" could disclose nothing whatsoever. There would be nothing within the facts or within the mind of the investigator to determine objectively an order, relationship, specific quality or modality for these random sensations. If facts signify nothing in themselves, they - whatever "they" amounts to! - cannot be used to test worldviews because they would be compatible with any number of conflicting (imposed) systems of meaning or interpretation. Van Til's denial of "brute facts" and "purely observational" knowledge is in line with recent philosophical criticism of the epistemological theory of empiricism as traditionally understood (eventuating in the distinctive tenets of positivism). What complicates the apologetical situation, though, is that the non-Christian tries (unsuccessfully) to suppress completely the evidential force of the facts by choosing and thoroughly applying presuppositions which run counter to what these facts indicate; i.e., the truth (meaning) of Christianity. Apologetics is thus required to argue in such a way as to strip away the autonomous and rebellious "glasses" through which unbelievers look at the revelational facts. Accordingly Van Til's defense of the faith "argues that every fact ... must be such as proves the truth of the Christian theistic position." The evidences, which are innumerable, must be presented in a manner which compels a return to their true nature as confirmatory of Christianity.

How is this done? Van Til says it is indispensable to present empirical evidences to unbelievers, but he immediately adds: "I would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer's philosophy of fact."[\[89\]](#) Philosophical (presuppositional) apologetics forms the context within which the use of evidences is intelligible and forceful. Without recognizing his biblical presuppositions and their epistemological necessity, the Christian cannot make sense out of his own apologetical argumentation with unbelievers based upon empirical evidence. For instance, if he agrees to base his reasoning upon the assumption of complete contingency in history (chance), then he cannot justify inductive, empirical thinking any more than his opponent can. Moreover, his appeal to miracles is unintelligible (since there is no objective background of uniformity in terms of which an event is miraculous).[\[90\]](#) Furthermore, if the apologist does not challenge the unbeliever's underlying philosophy, the appeal to empirical evidences need not lead to anything like Christian conclusions. For instance, if you empirically argue with a naturalist and convince him that the body of Jesus came back to life, he should - to be philosophically consistent - conclude that there are (as yet unknown - natural factors which can biologically cause and rationally account for the resuscitation of the dead.[\[91\]](#) With his presuppositions, he need not at all infer that a "miracle" occurred, that Jesus was "raised from the dead," that he must then be the "divine Son of God," or much less that he was resurrected "for our justification" and as a sign that "he will judge the world." None of these latter judgments are purely empirical in nature, and none of them follows logically (within the worldview of basic system of thought of the naturalist) from the empirical item that a dead body came back to life[\[92\]](#). Consequently, Van Til has taught that "it is impossible and useless to seek to defend Christianity as an historical religion by a discussion of facts only.... If we would really defend Christianity as an historical religion we must at the same time defend the theism upon which Christianity is based

and this involves us in philosophical discussion" - a philosophical discussion where the "fact" of the resurrection is not artificially and sharply separated from the "system of meaning" in terms of which it is inevitably understood.[93] Therefore, Van Til would not in the least "disparage the usefulness of arguments for the corroboration of the Scripture that came from archaeology" [for instance]; he would simply want to insist "that such corroboration is not of independent power." [94]

Because unbelievers self-deceptively espouse presuppositions contrary to those of the Christian, while nevertheless in actuality knowing God and inconsistently living in terms of that suppressed truth, truth which constitutes the Christian's acknowledged presuppositions,[95] they can understand the evidences presented by the believer and do - if the Holy Spirit graciously removes their resistance to the truth - in some cases, on that basis alone, draw the correct conclusion from the evidences. "We [should] present the message and evidence for the Christian position as clearly as possible, knowing that because man is what the Christian says he is, the non-Christian will be able to understand in an intellectual sense the issues involved. In so doing, we shall, to a large extent, be telling him what he 'already knows' but seeks to suppress. This 'reminding' process provides a fertile ground for the Holy Spirit, who in sovereign grace may grant the non-Christian repentance so that he may know him who is life eternal.[96]

However, if the unbeliever stubbornly and consistently clings to his espoused presuppositions and by means of them resists the force of the evidence as confirming Christian claims, then we must of necessity (and as usual) make explicit use of presuppositional argumentation. We must discuss the foundations of empirical study and inductive method in order to show that Christianity alone saves any scientific, historical knowledge. "Christianity does not thus need to take shelter under the roof of a scientific method independent of itself. It rather offers itself as a roof to methods that would be scientific!"[97] We must aim to show the unbeliever that by striving to move away from the revealed meaning indicated in the facts, he simultaneously moves away from the possibility of giving any account of the intelligibility and possibility of scientific knowledge about nature and history. "What we will have to do then is to try to reduce our opponent's position to absurdity. Nothing less will do." [98] For instance, the apologist "must challenge the legitimacy of the scientific method as based upon an assumed metaphysic of chance." [99] At the heart of it all, "the point is that the 'facts of experience' must actually be interpreted in terms of Scripture if they are to be intelligible at all." [100]

In short, Van Til contends that: "I am unable to follow [Kuyper] when from the fact of the mutually destructive character of the two principles [regenerate and unregenerate presuppositions] he concludes to the uselessness of reasoning with the natural man... Christianity is objectively defensible. And the natural man has the ability to understand intellectually, though not spiritually, the challenge presented to him. And [contrary to Warfield] no challenge is presented to him unless it is shown him that on his principle he would destroy all truth and meaning." [101]

We are thus brought back in our "evidentialist apologetic" to the same underlying strategy which is used more generally for "theistic proof." Traditional, old Princeton apologetics separated the general defense of theism (step 1: the proofs supplied in natural theology) from the more specific defense of Christian theism (step 2: scientific and historical evidences). In Van Til's apologetic these find their proper, underlying unity in the presuppositional and transcendental strategy of arguing "from the impossibility of the contrary" - arguing by means of an internal critique of the unbeliever's worldview, and then presenting the only positive alternative, the Christian worldview, if the intelligibility of experience or rational knowledge is not to be lost. Van Til puts it this way: "the true method for any Protestant with respect to the Scripture (Christianity) and with respect to the existence of God (theism) must be the indirect method of reasoning by presupposition. In fact it then appears that the argument for the Scripture as the infallible revelation of God is, to all intents and purposes, the same as the argument for the existence of God." [102] Having and arguing for the right presuppositions is, therefore, the fundamental requirement in defending the faith.

Machen's Agreement In Perspective

When one thinks of the reputation and accomplishments of Machen in the area of Christian apologetics, one thinks of clear and cogent historical arguments for the truthfulness of the Christian faith. One thinks of outstanding work in apologetical *evidences*.

The preceding analysis of Van Til's conception and method of Christian apologetics as it bears on "theistic proof" and "empirical evidence" discloses that, although their personal career emphases may have been in different areas, there is nothing in Machen's apologetical use of historical evidences which, as such, stands in conflict with Van Til's approach to the defense of the faith. The main reason why some critics pit Machen's apologetic work against that of Van Til is that they, without justification, construe Van Til to be opposed to any appeal to empirical evidence and to any form of rational argumentation in apologetics. That not being the case (but a misreading on a massive scale), Machen's argumentation from historical evidences may not reasonably be taken as diametrically at odds with Van Til's method of argument. Van Til's outlook provides for (as no competing apologetical school can), encourages, and even demands the use of those very empirical evidences which Machen mastered.

So, Machen utilized historical apologetics.[103] In harmony with him, Van Til says "I would...engage in historical apologetics." [104] They were both committed to making use of empirical evidence, but, we might ask, did they have the same conception of what they were doing with this empirical evidence? Did they have the same intention or aim in developing arguments from nature and history? There might be an initial inclination to think that they did not. After all, Van Til's point is that the correct use and persuasiveness of such evidences requires one to have

the correct - the Christian - outlook as his presupposition. Otherwise the evidences will not be accepted, not be interpreted accurately, and not even be made intelligible at all. This necessity of proper, revealed presuppositions in assessing the evidence from history explains why historical apologetics is so convincing and beneficial to the faith of the Christian, but not nearly so much so (by a wide, wide margin) with self-conscious unbelieving scholars. In some cases, to be sure, the historical argument brings unbelievers to the Christian conclusion - but not ever with a self-conscious, intellectually astute, and unceasingly determined unbeliever. At best in such cases, the historical apologetic is useful for embarrassing the arrogant claims and anti-religious hypotheses created by unbelieving scholarship.

Because of Machen's tie with old Princeton and its tradition of scholarship, one might *not expect* him to have conceived of his work in historical apologetics as requiring and resting upon Christian presuppositions, as Van Til taught. After all, Machen's great teacher, B. B. Warfield, maintained that apologetics must appeal to a notion of "right reason" which is *independent* of any commitment to belief or unbelief (neutrality), that apologetics must prove the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament *before* proving its inspiration and then presupposing it in other reasoning (autonomy), and that this kind of presuppositionally-neutral, historical apologetics is *directed particularly at unbelievers*, having a positive - indeed, the major - part to play in their *conversion*.

It is easy, of course, to say that a Christian man must take his standpoint not *above* the Scriptures, but *in* the Scriptures.... But surely he must first *have* Scriptures, authenticated to him as such, before he can take his standpoint in them.... [Faith is not] an irrational faith, that is, a faith without grounds in right reason.... We are arguing that faith is... necessarily grounded in evidence. And we are arguing that evidence accordingly has its part to play in the conversion of the soul.... And we are arguing that this part is not a small part; nor is it a merely subsidiary part; nor yet a merely defensive part... [but] rather a primary part, and it is a conquering part. It is the distinction of Christianity that it has come into the world clothed with the mission to *reason* its way to its dominion. Other religions may ... seek some other way to propagate themselves. Christianity makes its appeal to right reason.[\[105\]](#)

Let is not be said ... we found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences. Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true, and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us.... Inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines, nor even the first thing we prove about the Scriptures. It is the last and crowning fact as to the Scriptures. These we first prove authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, before we prove them inspired.[\[106\]](#)

We might expect Machen to have the same old Princeton conception of, and goal for, his historical apologetic; namely, to reason his way to dominion, to persuade intellectually unbelievers who do not presuppose the inspiration of Scripture of the truth of Christianity by using historical evidence which is compelling in itself to the unbeliever's neutral reasoning.

However, there is a remarkable passage in Machen's works where he reflects quite self-consciously and clearly upon what he is trying to accomplish and why he engages in historical or evidential argumentation in defense of the faith. This passage appears in two places, with slight variations between them, so Machen obviously felt it bore repeating. He was quite open about his reason for engaging in apologetics, clearing delineating it and setting it before his audiences on more than one occasion. What he said moved decidedly, even if with some remnants hanging on at places, out of the Warfieldian camp and a long way toward Van Til's presuppositional conception of evidences. This becomes manifest when we compare Warfield's words above with these from Machen's addresses, "The Importance of Christian Scholarship" (1932) and "Shall We Defend the Bible?" (1935). As the dates indicate, this reflects his most mature thinking, being toward the end of his life and career.

Sometimes, when I have tried - very imperfectly, I confess - to present arguments in defense of the resurrection of our Lord or of the truth, at this point or that, of God's Word, someone has come up to me after the lecture and has said to me very kindly: "We liked it, and we are impressed with the considerations that you have adduced in defense of the faith; but, the trouble is, we all believed in the Bible already, and the persons that really needed the lecture are not here." When someone tells me that, I am not very greatly disturbed. True, I should have liked to have just as many sceptics as possible at my lecture; but if they are not there I do not necessarily think that my efforts are all in vain. What I am trying to do by my apologetic lecture is not merely - perhaps not even primarily - to convince people who are opposed to the Christian religion. Rather I am trying to give to Christian people - Christian parents or Sunday School teachers - materials that they can use, not in dealing with avowed sceptics, whose backs are up against Christianity, but in dealing with their own children or with the pupils in their classes, who love them, and long to be Christians as they are, but are troubled by the hostile voices on every side.

It is but a narrow view of Christian apologetics that regards the defense of the faith as being useful only in the immediate winning of those who are arguing vigorously on the other side. Rather is it useful most of all in producing an intellectual atmosphere in which the acceptance of the gospel will be seen to be something other than an offence against the truth.

But because argument is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. What the Holy Spirit does in the new birth is not to make a man a Christian regardless of the evidence, but on the contrary to clear away the mists from his eyes and enable him to attend to the evidence.

So I believe in the reasoned defense of the inspiration of the Bible. Sometimes it is immediately useful in bringing a man to Christ. It is graciously used by the Spirit of God to that end. But its chief use is of a somewhat different kind. Its chief use is in enabling Christian people to answer the legitimate questions, not of vigorous opponents of Christianity, but of people who are seeking the truth and are troubled by the hostile voices that are heard on every hand.[\[107\]](#)

Sometimes, when I have given a lecture in defense of the truth of the Bible, a lecture, for example, which has adduced considerations to show that Christ really did rise from the dead on the third day, somebody has come up to me afterwards and has said very kindly something to the following effect: "We liked your lecture all right, but the trouble is that the people who need it are not here; we who are here are all Christian people, we are all convinced already that the Bible is true, so that we are not the ones who really needed to listen to what you had to say."

When people have told me that I have not been much discouraged.... It does seem rather surprising that people who pride themselves on being so broadminded should take their information about what is called by its opponents "Fundamentalism" from newspaper clippings or from accounts of "Fundamentalism" written by opponents... instead of reading what these [conservatives] have published in serious books over their own signatures, or instead of listening to what they have to say when they lecture. But although I do wish that my opponents in this debate would give me a fairer hearing, yet I am not too much discouraged when they are not present at one of my lectures. You see, what I am trying to do in such a lecture is not so much to win directly people who are opponents of the Bible as to give to Christian parents who may be present or the Christian Sunday-school teachers materials that they can use, not with those whose backs are up against Christianity, but with the children in their own homes or in their Sunday-school classes, the children who love them and want to be Christians as they are Christians, but are troubled by the voices against Christianity that are heard on every side.[\[108\]](#)

Many aspects of these two (similar) presentations of Machen's reflexive conception of his own work in historical apologetics are worth isolating for notice. First and foremost, Machen viewed the work of evidential, historical reasoning to be directed, quite contrary to Warfield, mainly to *believers*. Because believers come to the objections and evidences presupposing the biblically revealed perspective on knowledge and reality (the Christian worldview), the historical evidences will make a tremendous difference to them. Evidential reasoning will fortify their faith and will especially provide intellectual reassurance to those who are troubled by hearing the scholarly objections against Christianity raised all around them. That is, historical apologetics, diverging from Warfield again, is used chiefly for *defensive* purposes. Faith of a biblical sort (unlike purely emotional or volitional counterfeits) needs intelligent and detailed answers to the empirically oriented objections of critics, even when it already has the right presuppositions. It is just the discrepancy between those presuppositions and the unbeliever's claims which needs intelligent resolution.^[109] By appealing to evidence for this purpose, even if the unbeliever's basic commitments prevent him from accepting it, the apologist genuinely bolsters the faith of the believer by considerations which are objectively, intellectually sound. While inductive evidences may sometimes be used directly (in themselves) to bring someone from unbelief to faith, they do not ordinarily serve that function, says Machen (unlike Warfield).

The reason for this is not hard to find. Those who have alien presuppositions (e.g., avowed sceptics) are not at all neutral or "broad-minded"; they cannot give apologetical discussions "a fair hearing." Machen says that such people rather attend to their own preconceived notions and display a mindset of having "their backs up against Christianity." They have an axe to grind and are far from being committed to what Warfield called "right reason." They cannot receive or interpret the evidences correctly because, unlike the Christian parents, Sunday school teachers, and young believers who are troubled by "hostile" objections being raised, they are "vigorous opponents of Christianity" who do not bring to the evidences a mind of faith which has submitted to God's revelation previously. As such, in their intellectual rebellion, they must have their "eyes" changed *so that* they can, at last, "attend to the evidence" properly.

Without the enabling work of the Holy Spirit in their minds, nothing like Warfield's "right reason" is at their disposal. Such an evaluation and analysis from Machen is plainly in line with Van Til's presuppositionalist understanding of the situation. One may point to places in Machen's writings where he addresses his historical apologetic or evidential considerations to the open-minded, good sense of all rational people. One would fail Machen miserably, however, if one did not also recognize that Machen did not believe that such a description actually applied to the unbeliever. In theory (and objectively) if people used good sense, the evidences would drive them to Christian conclusions - but in actual living practice (subjectively), there are no instances of such good sense and open-mindedness among the ranks of the unregenerate. Therefore, in an extremely revealing passage in *What is Faith?*, Machen forthrightly declared that a personal conviction of sin was a prerequisite to the historical argument for Christ's resurrection:

Thus even in order to establish the fact of the resurrection, the lesson of the law must be learned.... Thus even in order to exhibit the truth of Christianity at the bar of reason, it is necessary to learn the lesson of the law. It is impossible to prove first that Christianity is true, and then proceed on the basis of its truth to become conscious of one's sin; for the fact of sin is itself one of the chief foundations upon which the proof is based.[\[110\]](#)

If Machen said (ideally) that "anyone whose mind is clear" and who will pursue "a fair scrutiny of the historical evidence" will find it "thoroughly reasonable to ... accept the truth of Christianity," he no less clearly said "*But no one's mind is clear who denies the facts of his own soul.*"[\[111\]](#) Unlike Warfield's conception of "right reason," Machen's conception was that regeneration "is necessary in order that [the] truly scientific attitude may be attained; it is not a substitute for the intellect, but on the contrary by it the intellect is made to be a trustworthy instrument for apprehending truth."[\[112\]](#) Accordingly, although in the face of Christianity's intellectual foes Machen took the bold stand that the scientific method applied to the objective evidences of history would lead to the truth of Christianity, he was equally cognizant that unbelievers cannot utilize such a method due to their suppression of the truth about God. To be rational and open-minded and scientific, so as to draw Christian conclusions from the evidence, men must acknowledge their sin and their rebellion - intellectual rebellion - against God. On the same page as the previous remark Machen thus said: "In order that Christianity may be recognized as true by men upon this earth the blinding effects of sin must be removed."

Furthermore, Machen will be found to have departed from Warfield's view in the direction of Van Til's on the issue of whether the doctrine of scriptural inspiration is the foundational conviction, or instead the crowning confession for the Christian system of thought. Warfield went to pains to make clear that he did not hold that the Christian viewpoint is based upon the doctrine of the Bible's plenary inspiration. It is, instead, based upon and supported by evidences, which in turn provide the proof or support needed for the doctrine of inspiration. Machen took the position, in contradistinction to this, that the doctrine of Scripture's plenary inspiration "is not in accordance with the wisdom of this world." Therefore, it can hardly be thought to stand acknowledged and proven according to the evidence and reasoning which are found acceptable to the worldly wise. Nevertheless, "that blessed doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible .. belongs not to the superstructure but to the foundation. If a man really holds to it, everything else for that man is changed."[\[113\]](#) What Warfield tried to make the "last and crowning fact" in the Christian outlook, Machen treated in the very opposite fashion as "belonging to the foundation" as the commitment which affects every other belief for a man. In this area, again, Machen's best insights are more in accord with the contours of Van Til's thinking than with Warfield's.

The significance of this for us is that, while Machen was unquestionably concerned to propound a historical apologetic which employed evidences in support of the Christian faith, he nevertheless

progressed beyond Warfield (even if not perfectly), putting inspiration in the place of a *presupposition*. Here was a final authority which is not accepted according to any more basic standard, such as human experience or the judgments of men. Machen taught that "we make the Bible, and the Bible only, the test of truth and of life.... But is it not a dangerous thing to reject other authorities in this fashion and submit ourselves unreservedly to the authority of this one Book? Yes, it is a very dangerous thing. It puts us sharply in conflict with the whole current of the age."[\[114\]](#) It is not simply in the church or within theological circles that Scripture is a standard more basic than human experience and human judgments. In the face of the whole current of modern thought Machen makes unreserved endorsement of the Bible as the final standard of thought.[\[115\]](#) Furthermore, our most basic (presuppositional) convictions as taken from Scripture are to be held firmly, whatever contrary voices or events challenge us: "Others may heed these voices that bid us lose confidence in the power of our God, but as for us Christians, we will say still, though ten million times ten million universes unloose against us all their mighty power, though we stand amid the clash of falling systems and contemplate a universal ruin - we will say still" what the Bible has taught us about God and our relationship to him.[\[116\]](#)

Very much like Van Til, who argued that Christianity must be defended "as a unit," Machen repeatedly stressed that the various teachings of the entire Bible all hang together, so that "we ought to take it as a whole" and not separate its parts from one another in the system.[\[117\]](#) But this is precisely what the neutral inductive approach must do, subjecting each isolated biblical claim to independent verification by some autonomous standard. Further, Machen recognized that the Christian worldview does not epistemologically divorce scientific matters from religious matters; that would be "just about the most destructive thing that could possibly be imagined," because the Christian religion is "most emphatically dependent upon facts."[\[118\]](#) What the apologist defends, then, is the full and integrated system of Christian truth - a worldview. This worldview stands in sharp antithesis with that of unbelievers, being "out of accord with the main trend of opinion both outside the Church and inside of it."[\[119\]](#)

Machen recognized that presuppositions control the divergent implications which will be drawn from the evidence, and thus sometimes castigated opponents of Christian conclusions in the study of the New Testament precisely for their starting points in false philosophy. Neutrality from philosophical bias could not be found, he said:

If the separation of science from religion is unwarranted, so also, it may be remarked in passing, is the separation of science from philosophy. Dr. Mullins seems ... to be supposing that there is such a thing as a "modern scientific criticism" of the New Testament which is independent of philosophical presuppositions, and the results of which can safely be accepted by men of differing shades of philosophical and religious opinion.... As a matter of fact we do not think that such a neutral, purely scientific criticism exists. The study of the New Testament, even

in the sphere of literary criticism, and certainly in the sphere of historical criticism, cannot get along with presuppositions.[\[120\]](#)

One can discern in Machen's own scholarship, precisely in his brilliant historical apologetic, that he held philosophically to a different view of history than the one which substantially prevailed among the historians of his day.[\[121\]](#) Unlike the conceptions of secular philosophy of history, Machen's presuppositions were absolutistic and supernaturalistic. He proceeded on the assumption that events have a fixed, inherent significance (i.e., were not "brute facts") and that "facts" (i.e., ideas about, or the meaning of, events) should be true and changeless. He still stands over against the cultural relativism and sociology of knowledge which infects the philosophy of history in our own day. Marsden perceives correctly that "Machen appeared fully to understand the tenets of modern scholarship; yet he was willing to concede nothing to its assumptions and implications."[\[122\]](#)

Machen also recognized that the unbeliever's presuppositions are bound up with his sinful desire to suppress God's revelation.[\[123\]](#) Accordingly, unlike the old Princeton tendency to minimize it, Machen spoke explicitly of "the intellectual effects of sin."[\[124\]](#) If the sinner clings to his *autonomy* in suppressing the revelation of God, held Machen, he will remain in darkness: "so long as we stand in our right, and have not had our eyes mysteriously opened, [we] are lost and blind in sin."[\[125\]](#) All unbelieving philosophies are of necessity destructive of knowledge: "we hold for our part that wherever a process in metaphysics is in antagonism to Christianity it is not rational but irrational."[\[126\]](#)

Over against the unbeliever's presupposed worldview which is destructive of knowledge, Machen sets the Christian position which is the key to all knowledge:

The supernatural Jesus is thus the key to a right understanding of early Christian history. But He is also the key to far more than that. Mankind stands in the presence of more riddles than the riddle of New Testament times. All about us are riddles - the riddle of our existence, the riddle of the universe, the riddle of our misery and our sin. To all those riddles Jesus, as the New Testament presents Him, provides the key. *He is the key not to some things but to everything. Very comprehensive, very wonderfully cumulative, very profound and very compelling is the evidence for the reality of the supernatural Christ.*[\[127\]](#)

Such words have the distinct ring of a presuppositional challenge to unbelief, claiming that nothing about the world and human experience can make sense apart from the "key" found in Christ. It also harmonizes with the presuppositional understanding of the comprehensive breadth of the evidence for proving the Christian position.

Although our indicators from Machen have been taken from scattered portions of his presentation, and although we should recognize that he did not extensively and self-consciously develop those presuppositional elements of thought in any one place and indeed may have fallen short of these insights from time to time (with traces of old Princeton ways of expression or argumentation), [128] we still cannot help but see that his conception of the defense of the faith bore definite lines of similarity with the distinctives of presuppositional thinking. In these particular points, anyway, Machen moved away from and beyond Warfield, the representative of the old Princeton approach. When we now add this observation to the previous considerations which have been adduced regarding Machen and Van Til, we come up with a rather strong case for concluding that there was a basic unity of conception between them regarding apologetics and evidence.

So let us recapitulate the discussion of those considerations. The personal histories of Machen and Van Til, we observed, are relevant to this question of the harmony between the two apologists, showing that they were quite cognizant of each other's contribution to the task of apologetics. There is every reason to expect that Machen and Van Til were able to understand what the other was saying in his published apologetical discussions or arguments, and that they would have been interested and motivated to do so. Consequently, from the fact that both Machen and Van Til were self-consciously dedicated to working with each other, and from their own expressions of respect and gratitude for the apologetic advanced by each other, we should infer that neither one of them found overwhelming objections in the other scholar's conception of apologetics. Furthermore, once Van Til's presuppositional approach to proof and evidence is analyzed, it becomes readily apparent that his method is not only open to the use of empirical evidences in the defense of the faith, it encourages and requires it. In that light, there is no conflict between Machen's engaging of historical argument for Christianity and the presuppositional method of argument which, in addition to setting forth evidences, would challenge the unbeliever to make intelligible his use of the scientific method and his interpretation of any part of his experience whatsoever. The key factor in Van Til's own philosophy of Christian proof and evidence is the requirement of having proper presuppositions as the preconditions for empirical, inductive study - as well as to interpret the facts of nature and history in such a way as to support the claims of Christianity. Then an examination of Machen's expressed conception and aim for his work in historical apologetics revealed that it too, along with Van Til's writings, acknowledged and was formulated in terms of the necessity of Christian presuppositions in order to make a profitable use of evidences for the faith. In what he said about this matter, Machen's reflections upon his own use of evidential apologetics proved to be at odds in significant ways with the old Princeton outlook represented by B. B. Warfield. Indeed, as we have just seen, a number of scattered features in Machen's defense of the faith coordinate with characteristic presuppositional emphases. The judgment is thus warranted in terms of personal history and ideology that the apologetic of Machen and that of Van

Til do not stand diametrically opposed to each other, but rather, when taken in concert, sound a strong and harmonious trumpet call to arms in defense of the historic Christian faith.

Conclusion

There are not two conflicting apologetical traditions in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, but one unified conception with two major and complementary emphases. That conception sets forth the truth of Christianity as (1) the philosophically necessary precondition for intelligible reasoning in any area of study, as well as (2) the conclusion to which every line of competent, painstaking, and empirical scholarship leads when applied to detailed questions in history, natural science, etc. Just because of the first emphasis, the second is approached with assurance and a dedication to resolving purported conflicts between secular scholarship and faith. The second emphasis, in order to be consistent, well-grounded, and effective requires and leads inescapably to the first.

Neither emphasis survives well without the other. Given the specific character of the Christian proclamation, we cannot defend the faith apart from consideration of the facts of nature and history. But given the character of the Christian worldview proclaimed, we cannot self-consciously discuss or debate those facts or evidences without asking what philosophical presuppositions are necessary for these or any facts to be known and intelligibly interpreted.

It is a concern, not that the teachers and pastors produced by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church have completely forgotten this rich apologetical tradition of Machen and Van Til, but rather that they have failed to understand and live up to it.[\[129\]](#) What is taken for granted is often lost. May it not be so in the next half century of our denomination's life. God graciously grant us power to "make foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20) while leading men to "know for certain" that Jesus rose from the dead as Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36).

[1] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923): "the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called 'modernism' or 'liberalism'.... The many varieties of modern liberal religion are rooted in naturalism.... Despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions" (pp. 2,7).

[2] The same could be said, according to Cornelius Van Til, about the *new modernism* (given the misnomer of "neo-orthodoxy") of the later dialectical theologians (*The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946]): "the dialectical theology of Barth and Brunner is built on one principle and this principle is to all intents and purposes the same as that which controls Modernism.... The new Modernism and the old are alike destructive of historic Christian theism and with it of the significant meaning of human experience" (p. xx). As is evident here, Van Til has carried forward Machen's own battle with twentieth-century theological apostasy even as Van Til has carried on Machen's case against the United Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. (e.g., *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967]): "the new theology...is an essentially humanistic theology which disguises itself as an up-to-date Christian theology"; "it is founded upon a new and relativistic view of truth" (p. 1).

[3] The denomination has continued through the years to have a strong affiliation with the seminary, but the two have no legal tie or identification with each other.

[4] D. F. Kelly, "Machen, John Gresham," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 673.

[5] One of the marks which distinguishes trials for ordination in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church from those in other denominations is the requirement that candidates be examined specifically in apologetics ("The Form of Government" XXIII.6, *The Standards of Government, Discipline and Worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 1984, 57).

[6] *The Presbyterian Guardian* (February 13, 1937), 189.

[7] David E. Kucharsky, "At the Beginning, God: An Interview with Cornelius Van Til," *Christianity Today* 22 (December 30, 1977) 6:18. For the significance of Van Til in the history of apologetical theory, see Greg L. Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics," *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross, 1976), 191-239.

[8] In some ways the seminary has not lived up to the high principles of Machen and Van Til (e.g., political expediency, pushing "practical" theology, meager publishing), but more particularly it

has steadily erased the specific legacy of these two champions, even though showing them public deference. Contrary to the spirit and convictions of Machen, the seminary has broached a more inclusivistic theological posture (de-emphasis of Reformed distinctives), catered to the vanity of a professional degree (non-academic), and advanced (through some instructors) social views at odds with Machen's clear conservatism. Obscuring Van Til's distinctive direction, the seminary appointed a president more sympathetic to Clark, granted tenure to someone in the apologetics department more sympathetic to Dooyeweerd, and now has an instructor in apologetics more sympathetic to Schaeffer.

[9] The stature and influence of these two in the history of the denomination was concretely illustrated at the denomination's two most disconcerting times: Machen's during the rupture associated with Buswell-McIntire, and Van Til's during the later rupture associated with Clark.

[10] *Van Til, Defender of the Faith: An Authorized Biography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 99. White wonders whether the hectic events, busy agendas, and administrative burdens surrounding the transition years from Princeton to Westminster might have rendered Machen oblivious to Van Til's new apologetical direction. The question, which prima facie might be asked regarding just about anybody else, underestimates the masterful mind of Machen and his absorbing personal concern for apologetical issues.

[11] *The James Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925).

[12] *The Thomas Smyth Lectures at Columbia Theological Seminary* (New York: Harper and Row, 1930).

[13] Vol. II of the series "In Defense of Biblical Christianity," published by the den Dulk Christian Foundation (n.p., 1969) - originally titled as a 1932 syllabus "The Metaphysics of Apologetics." The writer deems this publication a crucial key to grasping the transcendental thrust and philosophical implications of Van Til's apologetic method.

[14] (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), a republication of a number of earlier articles from various journals.

[15] *The New Testament: An Introduction to its Literature and History*, ed. W. J. Cook (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 9.

[16] *Christianity in Conflict*, vol. 1, part 1 of a mimeographed syllabus for a course at Westminster Seminary in the history of apologetics (1962), 17.

[17] *The Psychology of Religion*, vol. 4 in the series "In Defense of Biblical Christianity" (n.p.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971 [1935 syllabus]), 87.

[18] Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 73.

[19] *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 258. The first edition, though more prolix and complex, has definite advantages in understanding Van Til's presuppositionalism over the abridged second (1963) and third (1969) editions, which delete the discussion in which the above comment occurs. The quotation appears again *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (n.p. : Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 293.

[20] William Masselink, "Machen as Apologist," doctoral dissertation in 1938 under V. Hepp at the Free University of Amsterdam [later published as *J. Gresham Machen: His Life and Defence of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.)], 139ff.; John C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture a Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, N.J.: Mack, 1978) [another dissertation, this mainly under G. C. Berkouwer, at the Free University of Amsterdam], 7, 201,301. Cf. William D. Livingstone, "The Princeton Apologetic as Exemplified by the Work of Benjamin B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen: A Study in American Theology 1880-1930" (doctoral dissertation at Yale University, 1948); R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and A Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 209.

[21] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., chap. 13 (chap. 11 in later editions); *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, chap. 8-10; "My Credo" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the*

Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til, ed. E. R. Geehan (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 10-11, 18-19.

[22] In that vein, George M. Marsden argued at the Westminster Jubilee Conference (Aug. 31 - Sept. 3, 1979) that "a Christian presuppositional approach to truth" can and should redress defects in the "Baconian inductive" approach to truth taken by Machen ("J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth" printed in *The Westminster Theological Journal* 42 [1979] 1:157-75.

[23] Vander Stelt also maintains (in *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology*) that between Machen and Van Til there was a basic agreement in philosophical and theological approach - but with Van Til thought to be as essentially committed to the fundamental flaw of the *old Princeton approach* as was Machen (p. 313)! Such an innovative thesis is hard to take seriously, revealing (it would seem) much more about the mindset with which Vander Stelt approached his subject than the subject itself. He opposes any "scholastic," "intellectualistic," and "dualistic" thinking with its "static conception of truth" since it leads, as he imagines, to a "biblicism" which makes the grave error of seeing the Bible "as a rational rather than a religious revelation" (pp. 304-22). Of course, from that standpoint with its telling polarization of rational and religious, Van Til must indeed be grouped together with Machen - to the credit of both of them, I would think ("intellectualistically" and "dualistically") - along with Warfield, the Hodges, Berkhof, Bavinck, Kuyper, Edwards, Ames, Rutherford, Knox, Ursinus, Bucer, Calvin, Augustine and the host of orthodoxy throughout history. Vander Stelt's principle of differentiation offers little benefit in drawing distinctions *within* that circle.

[24] See, for instance, the autobiographical note in *Contemporary American Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Round Table, 1932), 254; cf. Machen's "Preface" to *The Christian View of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1937). Upon the death of Warfield in 1921 Machen wrote "It seemed to me that the old Princeton - a great institution it was - died when Dr. Warfield was carried out.... With all his glaring faults he was the greatest man I have known" (quoted by Stonehouse, 310).

[25] Stonehouse, esp. pp. 60-68, 147ff., 183ff., 410ff.

[26] Stonehouse, 307, 381, 385, 390-91. Machen admired Dr. Greene as "one of the best Christians I have ever known" (p. 439).

[27] Mark A. Noll calls him "the last of the major defenders of this tradition" in *The Princeton Theology: 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 16.

[28] Marsden says Machen's view that "nothing could be held true if it did not pass the test of conformity to the rules of empirical scientific inquiry" was built on the epistemological foundation of Scottish common sense realism, "which had been the overwhelmingly prevailing philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary" ("J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth," 165,167).

[29] This point is similar, I take it, to that made by Marsden in the article cited above. Despite its epistemological weaknesses, claims Marsden, Machen's actual approach to truth surpassed in presuppositional characteristics the practice of others who were also committed to "Baconian induction" (pp. 174-75). It should be observed, however, that the antithesis posited by Marsden between induction and presuppositionalism (p. 173) is somewhat overgeneralized.

[30] For particular historical points about the lives of Machen and Van Til, which I have interwoven below, see the respective biographies by Ned. B. Stonehouse and William White, Jr., cited earlier.

[31] Respectively: *Biblical and Theological Studies* by members of the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912); *The Princeton Theological Review* 11 (January 1913) and 13 (July 1915).

[32] White, chap. 7.

[33] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), dedicated to F. L. Patton.

[34] Respectively: *The Bible Today* (May 1923); *The Princeton Theological Review* 22 (October 1924), 23 (January 1925), 24 (January 1926); "The Bible League Lectures" for 1927 (reprinted in J. Gresham Machen *What is Christianity? And Other Addresses*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951]).

[35] See the first eight selections in J. Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent, and Other Selected Sermons*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949).

[36] That Van Til took a decided and personal interest in Machen's struggles is evident later (for instance) in his articles for *The Banner* on such things as "The Story of Westminster Theological Seminary" (vol. 65[1930]: 657-58), "Recent Events in the Presbyterian Church" (vol. 69 [1934]: 582-83), and "A Crushing Experience" (vol. 71 [1936]: 1062-63).

[37] Machen's close associate and Warfield's successor, Casper Wistar Hodge, Jr., was Van Til's advisor in the master's program.

[38] "Introductory Note" to Francis R. Beattie's *Apologetics* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903), 20-30.

[39] 25 (1927) 2:336-38.

[40] Van Til maintained from the start that *all* apostate philosophies fell prey to the same fundamental critique. In 1930 he wrote: "Idealism as well as Pragmatism, it seems to me, has embraced the relativity of truth and value.... Together they form a secret alliance against Theism.... The God of Idealism is not the God of Theism but is rather the God of Pragmatism" ("God and the Absolute," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 2 [1930]: 358, reprinted in Van Til's *Christianity and Idealism*, chap. 1).

[41] White surmises that (1) Van Til's caution and courtesy as a student and (2) the seminary's preoccupation with its own political unrest while Van Til was an instructor kept the Princetonians from seeing the implications of his views (pp. 63, 76-77). But his visibility was not really that low - not after five years of course work in the same town, prize-winning papers, graduate accomplishments, the published review of Whitehead, and being invited to teach at the very time and *in the very department* where all the concentration of controversy over Machen came to a head!

[42] Quoted by Stonehouse, 437.

[43] Machen himself would later write on "The Necessity of the Christian School," "The Christian School, the Hope of America' (both in the proceedings of the National Union of Christian Schools, 1933 and 1934), and "Shall We Have Christian Schools?" (*The Presbyterian Guardian* [January 9, 1937]). The first mentioned article is reprinted in *What is Christianity? and Other Addresses*.

[44] *The Princeton Theological Review* 27(1929) 1;135-36.

[45] The general assembly of 1926 had postponed confirmatory action on Machen's call, using this as the occasion to erect a committee to investigate Princeton Seminary and tensions there. The investigating committee proceeded to work for the complete reorganization of the institution in such a way as to stifle its conservative theological thrust.

[46] Within weeks, it turns out, this conservative board would lose its struggle to retain control of the seminary. At the very time of Van Til's call, the plan to reorganize Princeton was impending, waiting to be acted upon by the general assembly.

[47] Stonehouse, 437. Despite such words, some might doubt that Machen really would have been attentive to theoretical matters (like apologetics) in the midst of the political storm over the loss of Princeton and the hurried beginning of Westminster in the spring and summer of 1929. But Machen was an extraordinary person in this regard, maintaining his "academic" interests despite the practical turmoils of the day. During that same hectic summer in which Westminster was born, Machen did his concluding work on the manuscript for *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, one of his apologetical masterpieces! Moreover, even if his words of endorsement for Van Til were uttered in harried circumstances, Machen had been acquainted with Van Til and his work for a considerable time previous to the commendation.

[48] The 1929 general assembly voted decisively for the plan of reorganization, appointed two signers of the Auburn Affirmation to the new board of control, and (illegally) invested the new board with immediate governing direction prior to necessary charter changes. Hence the seminary would no longer be under conservative control.

[49] White, 89.

[50] *The Bible League* (London: W.C.I.); reprinted by Shelton College Press (Cape May, NJ: 1969) and in *What is Christianity? And Other Addresses*.

[51] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936).

[52] Later titled *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*.

[53] For a listing of these, see "Writings of Cornelius Van Til" in *Jerusalem and Athens*, 492-98.

[54] Even if the exact depth of Machen's comprehension of, and ability to give philosophical enunciation to, presuppositionalism is unknown (cf. White, 99), there can be no doubt that he was cognizant of its basic features and distinctives over against traditional "evidentialism."

[55] White, 99.

[56] In my office the morning following a public debate over apologetic method, I read out loud to R.C. Sproul numerous quotations from Van Til on these matters to show how he had misconstrued the professor. He was shocked that such things could be found in Van Til's works. (I was shocked that he would debate against presuppositionalism without knowing about them.) Mr. Sproul has still not appreciated or understood what Van Til says here, judging from his recent book on the subject, *Classical Apologetics*, where Van Til is presented with stubborn inaccuracy in the guise of "fideism" (pp. 184-87, 307-309). One is amazed at the way the book labors to recast all the hard, contrary, empirical evidence from Van Til, Frame, Nataro, and myself so as to protect its subjectively chosen presupposition that Van Til must be called a "fideist." A polemic this desperate is on its last legs. [A tape of the "Sproul-Bahnsen Debate" is available from Covenant Media Foundation, 4425 Jefferson Ave. Ste. 108 Texarkana, AR. 71854-1529 (1-800-553-3938)

[57] To be honest, we must also admit that some who claim to follow these scholars have proven "embarrassing advocates" (as C. S. Lewis would put it), bolstering these false preconceptions in testimony and practice. Armed with a few slogans (e.g., about "autonomous man" suppressing the

truth, about "presuppositions settling everything, "about "reasoning in circles"), if not a bit of intellectual laziness, some ministers disdain intellectual argumentation with unbelieving challenges to the gospel. Forget detailed study and philosophical reasoning, they figure, since such can make no difference to somebody with contrary presuppositions anyway. People in different circles of thought cannot persuade each other, but only mutually loathe what each other says. Bible professors can ignore well-reasoned, detailed answers to higher critical attacks on the Bible, dismissing the critics with a simple reference to their rebellious presuppositions. And reasoning about those conflicting presuppositions themselves is (hastily) rejected as out of the question. To cite the name of Van Til in connection with such attitudes or practices brings unwarranted insult.

[58] "The Philosophy of Christian Evidences," *Jerusalem and Athens*, 420,425.

[59] See, e.g., my response to Daniel Fuller and Clark Pinnock, who together painted Van Til as opposed to empirical procedures and inductive investigation ("Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism,," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 [December 1977]:289-305; also Thom Nataro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980]).

[60] E.G., does the cosmological argument fallaciously move from 'each event has a cause' to 'all events (together) have a (single, common) cause'? Is it warranted to move from a premise pertaining to natural events and relations (e.g., 'every event has a cause' - something interpreted according to, and proven from, our experience) to a conclusion which - unlike the premise - pertains to a non-natural event, relation, or object (which is beyond our experience)?

[61] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 94-95.

[62] "A Letter on Common Grace" (1953), reprinted in *Common Grace and the Gospel* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 193.

[63] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 197,256.

[64] "A Letter on Common Grace," 181.

[65] *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), 62.

[66] "My Credo," *Jerusalem and Athens*, 21.

[67] *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 33, 19.

[68] *Common Grace*, 49.

[69] *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (syllabus at Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961 [originally 1935]), 37.

[70] "Introduction" in B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 38.

[71] "Once Upon an A Priori," *Jerusalem and Athens*, 391; cf. Pinnock's charge that Van Til is guilty of "irrational fideism" which holds that "truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence" ("The Philosophy of Christian Evidences") 423, 425). Both Montgomery and Pinnock distort Van Til's view as Barth's error that belief cannot argue with unbelief, a voluntaristic position which "demands the non-Christian make a total and ungrounded commitment" (391, 422-23). With bewildering inaccuracy Pinnock summarizes Van Til's approach as being the fideistic combination of "a bare authority claim [and] a bare religious experience claim" (*Biblical Revelation - The Foundation of Christianity Theology* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 38-42). Should it not embarrass such advocates of the use of inductive evidence that, in their characterizations of Van Til, they choose to portray him according to their (false) a priori conceptions, rather than by looking at the abundant (empirical!) evidence in his writings which can be inductively ascertained? Just compare the quotations from Montgomery and Pinnock with those adduced from Van Til himself.

[72] *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 205.

[73] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 117.

[74] *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 225.

[75] Montgomery, "Once Upon an A Priori," 392; Pinnock, "The Philosophy of Christian Evidences," 421, 424-425.

[76] *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 35.

[77] *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, ii, 62.

[78] *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, vol. 5 of the series "In Defense of Biblical Christianity" (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974 [first edition in 1937]), 45.

[79] *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 7,9.

[80] *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 146.

[81] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 258; Van Til adds that the only reason he did not engage in it extensively in print is that his colleagues in other departments at Westminster Seminary were already doing it better than he thought he could.

[82] *Ibid.*; these remarks are repeated in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 293.

[83] E.g., why should the unbeliever accept "the basic reliability" of the extant New Testament documents simply due to their (usually overstated) "early date"? If a document is full of what is taken as the most obvious absurdities and superstitions (e.g., the large number of purported "miracles"), even if we possess the autographical copy of it, the naturalistic unbeliever will not

grant its "basic reliability"! Secondly, how can the naturalistic unbeliever be expected to treat these documents simply as reliable reports of what Jesus said about himself? Such reports have a mere man (according to the naturalistic skeptic) claiming an incredible divine character and prerogative, as well as predicting his own resurrection. It will certainly seem more probable to the consistent use of "common sense" that the apostles misconstrued what their teacher was trying to say (a general tendency in students, as we can easily verify), exaggerated it later in veneration for him, or simply did not recall it accurately. The defense made to this by virtually every non-presuppositional evidentialist (e.g., Montgomery, Sproul) is that Christ promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers to enable them to remember and interpret correctly what he taught - a defense which blatantly begs the question at hand since it assumes the very deity of Jesus which the argument was supposed to prove. Numerous, similar gaffs in the traditional evidentialist reasoning might be pursued.

[84] E.g., if we rigorously reject the intrusion of arbitrary metaphysical prejudices, man's mind is taken as a "tabula rasa" in a completely contingent, "chance" universe where only "particulars" (not abstract universals) exist. In such a cause, there can be no logical or natural laws, no generalization or probability, no intelligible appeal to causality; language could not be learned, radical subjectivity and the ego-centric predicament could not be avoided, and there could be no justification for maintaining the reliability or sense perception or memory.

[85] That is, apart from engaging in philosophical apologetics, such as is found in the transcendental theistic proof discussed above or in considering matters such as 3 and 4 here.

[86] Not simply emotional confidence, subjective assurance, volitional commitment, etc.

[87] If they are, then apologists like Montgomery, Pinnock, or Sproul must (1) resort to subjective matters like "experiential proof," the "practical certainty" which compels us to take action despite risks, or the inward convicting witness of the Spirit in order to enable them to take the "leap of faith" up from the level of what intellectual proof honestly warrants (no more than probability, according to them) to the higher level of full belief and personal confidence, and (2) press the fallacies of overstatement and hasty generalization into service so as to maintain a public stance of being committed to "full biblical inerrancy" exclusively on the platform of evidentialism or natural theology (despite their not examining or proving Scripture's every claim, and despite the admission of unresolved empirical difficulties regarding some scriptural phenomena). From these two observations it becomes ironically evident that those who have (falsely) criticized Van Til for "fideism" are much closer to it in reality than he has ever been.

[88] *Apologetics*, Westminster Seminary syllabus (1966 [original edition 1935]), 36.

[89] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st. ed., 258' (repeated in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 293).

[90] The apologist "will throw all these facts [the resurrection and the evidences verifying it] at the unbeliever, and the unbeliever throws them over his back into the bottomless pit of Chance.... David Hume, the great skeptic, has effectively argued that if you allow any room for Chance in your thought, then you no longer have the right to speak of probabilities.... No one hypothesis would have any more relevance to facts than any other hypothesis.... On this basis nature and history would be no more than a series of pointer readings pointing into the blank" (*Ibid.*,336-37).

[91] "We must allow that it is quite possible [in terms of a neutral scientific method] that at some future date all the miracles recorded in the Bible, not excluding the resurrection of Christ, may be explained by natural laws" (Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, 65).

[92] "But the completely unusual, the nearly unique, nature of such an occurrence must be appreciated," we may hear. Yes, but exactly how one philosophically treats the realm of "the unusual" is open to a much wider variety of intellectual options than evidentialists seem to recognize. As Van Til cryptically observes: on non-Christian assumptions, far from needing to be a matter of religious solemnity or significance, "the resurrection of Jesus would be a fine item for Ripley's *Believe It or Not*" (*The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 334).

[93] *Ibid.*, 23-24, 332-33.

[94] "Introduction" to Warfield, 37.

[95] This is a crucial aspect of Van Til's apologetic outlook: e.g., *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 107ff., 171ff., 181ff.: *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 18-19, 21-24: etc.: Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Apologetic Implications of Self-Deception" (tapes #217-218 from Covenant Media Foundation, 4425 Jefferson Ave. Ste. 108 Texarkana, AR. 71854-1529 (1-800-553-3938)

[96] Van Til, "My Credo," *Jerusalem and Athens*, 21.

[97] *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, 56.

[98] *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 204.

[99] *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, 63.

[100] *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 26.

[101] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 363,364.

[102] *Ibid.*, 125-126.

[103] For an excellent illustration, see the address delivered by Machen at his inauguration as assistant professor of new Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary: "History and Faith," *The Princeton Theological Review* 13 (1915) 3:337-51.

[104] *The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., 258.

[105] "Introduction to Francis R. Beattie's *Apologetics*," reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* vol. 2, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, J.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 98-99.

[106] "The Real Problem of Inspiration" reprinted in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 210.

[107] "The Importance of Christian Scholarship," Shelton College press reprint (1969), 18-19.

[108] "Shall We Defend the Bible?," *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, 63-65.

[109] Machen, like Van Til, insisted that because "truth is essentially one," the Christian cannot ignore or be indifferent to objections raised against his faith ("Shall We Defend the Bible?," 61-62), Obscurantism is not any help to the cause of Christ. Accordingly, Machen also pointed out, as we have done above, that evidences can perform a kind of "debris-clearing" function in the unbeliever's thinking, disabusing him of the prejudice that Christians are anti-intellectual people, without a ghost of an idea of how to reconcile their faith with scientific criticisms: "A man hears an answer to objections raised against the truth of the Christian religion; and at the time when he hears it he is not impressed. But afterwards, perhaps many years afterwards, his heart at last is touched.... And when he will believe he can believe because he has been made to see that believing is not an offence against truth" ("The Importance of Christian Scholarship," 18).

[110] *What is Faith?*, 133-34.

[111] *Ibid.*, 134-35, emphasis added.

[112] *Ibid.*, 135.

[113] *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, 37.

[114] *Ibid.*, 84-85; cf. 76ff.

[115] Of course, since Machen deemed the churchmen and theologians whom he opposed as not holding to the Christian position, *their* opposition represented the opposition mounted by unbelief just as much as opposition voiced by those "in the world." He explicitly said that the defense of

the faith "should be directed not only against the opponents outside the Church but also against the opponents within" ("The Importance of Christian Scholarship," 21). So we have good reason to say that Machen maintained that unbelief must be combatted by an unreserved commitment to Scripture as the sole, foundational, and unchallengeable standard for our thoughts.

[116] *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, 109-110).

[117] *Ibid.*, 54-58, 68-69, 80, 111.

[118] *Ibid.*, 54-55.

[119] *Ibid.*, 34; cf. 37, 59; ["One thing needs always to be remembered in the Christian Church - true Christianity, now as always, is radically contrary to the natural man" ("The Importance of Christian Scholarship," 16).]

[120] "The Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy," *The Princeton Theological Review* 24 (1926) 1:51-52.

[121] See Marsden's discussion of this fine insight, "J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth," 158-64, 169-70. My essay betrays, of course, that on some matters it seems to me Marsden forces his interpretation of Machen (e.g., regarding "common sense." "Baconian induction," "elimination of any legitimate place for [cultural] perspective").

[122] *Ibid.*, 158.

[123] *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, 21-22; E.T., 69.

[124] "The Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy," 59.

[125] *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, 22.

[126] "The Relationship of Religion to Science and Philosophy," 60.

[127] *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, 70, emphasis added.

[128] E.g., Machen sometimes talks as though the apologist can show an unbeliever, even before accepting inspiration, that on the same basis as one uses in evaluating any other historical book, he ought to conclude that the Bible is "substantially true" and then, from that conviction, logically go on to conclude that it is "altogether true" (*Ibid.*, 51-52; cf. 68,70). An earlier indication of old Princeton thinking was Machen's notation that "the historical evidence for the resurrection amounted only to probability; probability is the best that history can do" ("History and Faith," 350).

[129] One cannot help but observe, with disappointment, the way so few candidates for the OPC ministry actually grasp and can intelligently put into practice the presuppositional method in philosophical apologetics (as expounded for so many years by Van Til), as well as the sparse number of masterful publications of empirical scholarship produced by our ministers in answer to modern challenges (on the order of Machen's contributions).