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# THE IMPORTANCE OF VAN TIL FOR TODAY

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## INTRODUCTION

- We will explore the enduring relevance of Van Til’s work and thought, analyzing his theological contributions against the backdrop of his historical context while tracing their resonance in our own.
- Van Til has shaped the field of Reformed apologetics, drawing upon the strengths of Old Amsterdam and Old Princeton. But his impact extends beyond apologetics, affecting broader theological discussions and the identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

## COMMITMENT TO CONFSSIONAL FAITHFULNESS

- Van Til was raised in the Dutch theological tradition deeply influenced by the Seceders of the nineteenth-century Dutch *Afscheiding*. Van Til drew a parallel between the *Afscheiding* and the Presbyterian Conflict of the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>
- Van Til’s confessional integrity is a reminder for Christians to remain faithful to the Scriptures and our historic creeds and confessions that summarize the teaching of Scripture, especially amidst modern challenges to orthodoxy.

## DISTINCTLY REFORMED WITNESS

- Van Til served on the Committee of Nine in the 1940s, influencing the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s stance on various issues.
  - The OPC was caught in a battle over its own identity.
  - Edwin Rian and J. Oliver Buswell, two of the committee’s members, represented a faction within the OPC advocating for an evangelical influence and a form of American Christian nationalism.
- Often acting as a “Dutch antibody”<sup>2</sup> against nationalistic and cultural dilutions of the faith, Van Til challenged Rian and Buswell’s agenda with a call for the OPC to retain a distinctly Reformed witness.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, “Afscheiding in 1936?,” *De Reformatie* 16, no. 4 (October 25, 1935). A collection of these articles translated by Daniel Ragusa is forthcoming from Reformed Forum.

<sup>2</sup> Charles G. Dennison, “The Heritage of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” in *History for a Pilgrim People: The Historical Writings of Charles G. Dennison*, ed. David K. Thompson and Danny E. Olinger (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2002), 25.

## DOCTRINE OF GOD

- We find ourselves in a unique juncture in confessional and evangelical churches, characterized by a rising interest in Thomas Aquinas as a solution to modern theological drifts.<sup>3</sup> There are compelling reasons for this:
  - First, the theological landscape is rife with misguided and novel interpretations of God's nature, as evidenced by debates such as that over the Eternal Functional Subordination of the Son (EFS).
  - Second, the growing field of Reformed Scholasticism has led many scholars to appreciate and explore the medieval foundations of Reformation theology.
- Not infrequently this renewed appreciation for Aquinas comes bundled with criticisms of Cornelius Van Til.
  - Some argue that Van Til's unique approach to Reformed doctrines places him at odds with orthodoxy, further fueling the turn towards Aquinas.
  - Complicating the picture, some notable theologians, who are closely linked with Van Til, have advanced controversial theological views.
    - For example, John Frame has posited a dual-existence doctrine of God.<sup>4</sup>
    - Similarly, K. Scott Oliphint proposed that God can assume covenantal properties and even a covenant mind by which he can learn and develop in relation to his creation.<sup>5</sup>
  - On the street, the argument seems to be: "If you follow Van Til or criticize Aquinas, you must abandon classical theism."
- Central to Van Til's theology is his unyielding opposition to correlativism or what he also called pantheism, a terminology he borrowed from his mentors and colleagues, Machen and Vos.
- Van Til's doctrine of God holds significant importance for the contemporary church, both in maintaining the classical understanding of God's being and attributes and in addressing current theological and philosophical challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023); James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2011); James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017); J. V. Fesko, "Should Old Aquinas Be Forgotten?," *Credo Magazine*, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://credomag.com/article/should-old-aquinas-be-forgot/>; Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas*, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6461217>; Ryan M. McGraw, *Reformed Scholasticism: Recovering the Tools of Reformed Theology* (London: Bloomsbury UK: T & T Clark, 2019); Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, eds., *Aquinas among the Protestants*, First edition (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781119265955>; Carl R. Trueman, "The Reception of Thomas Aquinas in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy and Anglicanism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 596–611.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 570–72.

<sup>5</sup> The implications of Oliphint's proposal are perhaps clearest when he applies his theology to a concrete biblical example: "In condescending to relate to Adam and Eve, he is, like them, (not essentially, but covenantally) restricted in his knowledge of where they might be hiding in that garden." In other words, there is a literal sense in which God did not know Adam and Eve's whereabouts. K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2006), 234. See especially, K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 191–228. For further discussion of Dr. Oliphint's proposals, see Camden M. Bucey, "Addressing the Essential-Covenantal Model of Theology Proper," *Reformed Forum*, May 27, 2019, <https://reformedforum.org/addressing-the-essential-covenantal-model-of-theology-proper/>.