

Forum:

Controversial Discussion between Mr. Mark Punford and the
Editor concerning:

Cornelius Van Til Paradox and "Apparent" Contradictions Discussion contin. from BRJ no. 22 April-June 1998

Mr. Punford:

(My) **sixth** point, to which you have responded, is that of the profundity of Van Til, concerning which, you advise me that such profundity is no barometer of accuracy. I take your point over this, and of course it was no part of my intention to suggest that the mere existence of genius or profundity necessarily issued in accuracy of judgment; but then by the same token, exegetical skills and simplicity of expression offer no guarantee that the Gordon Clarks of this world are accurate either in some of their conclusions. **Your claim that Van Til worked out of the same epistemological milieu as Barth if you don't mind my saying so, really takes the cake-----**I think that this sort of claim is too ridiculous to require detailed rebuttal and **only evidences the extent of the prejudice against Van Til to which the B.R.F's rationalism and eccentric notion of paradox leads them. I would deny that Van Til is either "internally self contradictory" or "enigmatic",** claiming rather that his explanations are complimentary as they address various aspects of the natural Man's epistemological situation in which, as Scripture itself states so clearly, **the natural Man both knows, and does not know, God. I am astonished that Frame considers Van Til difficult to understand.** At any rate, Frame is not a consistent presuppositionalist, whatever he likes to call himself, and he does not do justice to the legacy of Van Til's work in defence of the scriptural antithesis which obtains betwixt believing and unbelieving thought. **I find it not a little strange that the B.R.F should claim that Van Til failed to discriminate between paradox and contradiction-----** Van Til does indeed articulate a peculiarly Christian form of both paradox and mystery.

Seventhly, as for your reference to the supposed **neo-Hegelian quagmire in which Van Til is said to have landed himself** via his assertion of the seeming contradictions scripture yields to the darkened understanding-----a whole host of assumptions are operative here, not least those which are predicated upon a highly debateable interpretation of Hegelian logic. It is by no means obvious that the interpretation acceptable to Schaeffer and Carew-Hunt is the one we should accept; the vast majority of philosophers—not to mention Hegel scholars—would not regard the late Dr. Schaeffer as a reliable historian of Intellectual History. That the masses have been infected with a dangerous and radical species of both relativism on the one hand and downright Irrationalism on the other is not in dispute---- but whether this satanic phenomenon should be laid at the door of Hegel is another matter.

To begin with, Hegel believed in absolute, not relative truth, and secondly it is highly implausible, the difficulties in Hegel interpretation notwithstanding, that a thinker of Hegel's stature would commit a logical blunder on the level attributed to him by Schaeffer so as to say that A can be non A at one and the same time and in one and the same respect. It is much

more likely that Hegel's point was the limitation imposed upon any finite statement which further qualifying statements can supplement on their journey toward the limiting concept of all possible true statements. **Why connect Van Til with either Hegel or Barth whether or not one happens to accept His view of paradox?**

Editor's Response:

Van Til was probably one of the most profound and important philosophic figures in the history of 20th Cent. Christianity. Fundamentally his "presuppositionalist" philosophy underlies the modern "Christian Reconstructionist" movements, and such movements hail him as if some kind of patron saint. However, Van Til's theory of Common Grace happens to be the exact opposite of what many Reconstructionists believe (and require for their system to work). On another front, Van Til's Christian Theory of Knowledge is seen as semi-nally important to "Multiperspectivalism", or "Orchestral Theology". Without going in to all these areas, we confine ourself for the moment to the matters raised by Mr. Punford. Henceforth we refer to Van Til as "VT", and we address ourselves most particularly to the key phrases in Mr. Punford's letter, which we have highlighted in bold print.

First:

With reference to the point I made (pages 48 and 42 in British Ref. Journal No. 13, responding to your first letter printed therein) please note that I was not claiming infallibility for Gordon Clark. To the contrary, I explicitly stated in the very last sentence that we at the BRF did not regard Clark, or any other man, as being an "infallible paradigm". And that goes in all respects including the matters of the nature and limits of Rationality. But we would assert that Clark's logic is clearer, more precise, and more consistent than that of the highly obtuse Van Til. And more importantly, Clark majored more thoroughly in the exegetic field than Van Til. In consequence his use of logic is more likely to have been under Biblical control.....by comparison remember Van Til's own admission: "the lack of detailed scriptural exegesis is a lack in all of my writings"..... "and I have no excuse for this..."¹ VT goes on in fact to admit his dependence on the "Bottenberg" series of Commentaries, as having been a help to him over the years, as also he later cites John Murray, his then former colleague at Westminster Seminary. This admission is a salient and sufficient indictment of much of VT's work, because, *he insisted throughout his work that all theological positions had to be established primarily via reference to Scripture*. And, that one may not make deductions from one teaching of Scripture into other areas of doctrine without firstly bringing the deductions to Scripture to see whether they fit with Scripture. I ask, did he consistently do this himself? His reliance on other sources simply landed him in whatever errors those sources carried. He was therefore making logical deductions galore on the basis of his faith in someone else's exegesis, and was not going direct to Scripture himself to check out his deductions.

VT's penchant was in the realms of Philosophy, where he majored in the areas of Epistemology, Psychology, and Apologetics, and not Exegetics. In his Seminary lectures, I am told on good authority, most of the material he delivered was clean over the top of the heads of most of his students, most of whom found him to be enigmatic, difficult to understand, and confusing. A recent book by a learned student and former colleague of VT, John Frame, bears out this fact. Mr. Punford says however, concerning this book, **"I am aston-**

¹ Cf. Geehan, Ed. Van Til in "Jerusalem and Athens" (P&R 1971) page 203. Here VT was responding to G.C. Berkouwer's : The Authority of Scripture (A Responsible Confession).in which he raised this issue.

ished that Frame considers Van Til difficult to understand." But Frame gives evidence in that he can cite another learned former student of VT, Dr. John Gerstner, as having a different interpretation of VT to that of Frame himself,² and it happens that Mr. Punford disagrees with both!³ Now if that's not the result of "obtuseness" and "difficulties", what is? More so, VT himself betimes recognized and admitted all this! Let VT speak:

"No doubt there is a grave lack of clarity in my exposition. But the basic reason for 'lack of clarity' in the 'biblical system' (i.e., VT's system of thought. *Ed.*) is for me due to the fact that God's unity of purpose cannot be exhaustively understood and expressed by the believer. It is the mystery of God in Christ before which we should bow."⁴

With regard to me saying that Van Til "worked out of the same epistemological milieu as Barth", may I say that I shall not be needing to take any of Mr. Punford's cake.(Chuckle chuckle!) First, what I said was:

"An evident failure here to discriminate between paradox and contradiction landed Van Til squarely in the same neo-Hegelian quagmire as Barth, *and Brunner*, this latter who could also, like Van Til, **rampantly oppose Barth** from within the same epistemological milieu but for different reasons!"

I thought that this statement put Brunner as opposing Barth from within the same "epistemological milieu", not VT, and that the likeness to VT in this respect was over the fact that they both critiqued Barth. True, I should have phrased it more precisely.

Mr. Punford goes on to focus on **"the extent of the prejudice against VT to which the BRF's rationalism and eccentric notion of paradox leads them..."** To the contrary, I and others on the BRF consider that VT made some telling contributions in the area of Apologetics, and that his actual work on "common grace" is something of an eye-opener, which in fact hits a mighty hole in the "Kuyperian" form of common grace that is the usually uncritically espoused dogma of common grace rampant in Reformed circles today. Of the

² Cf. John M. Frame: *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought*. (Philipsburg NJ P&R 1995 and chapter 1 "Starting Point".

³ John Frame's book has been criticized from several quarters. But this simply is illustrative of the point I am making. Frame, a highly intelligent man, holder of the Arts Baccalaureate degree from Princeton, a BD from Westminster, and two Masters degrees from Yale, and presently Prof. of Apologetics himself at Westminster's Western Campus in California was a student of VT and a colleague. If Frame has "got him wrong" in any serious way or degree, then this speaks volumes about the obtuseness of the subject. Indeed, I am told Frame has been accused from various quarters of "bending" VT or of "out-Van-Til-ing Van Til". More seriously, the late Dr. John Gerstner's Work on Apologetics is listed by Frame as essentially "debunking" VT. When one objectively views the disparate opinions and views of VT which Frame adumbrates in Ch. 1 of his work then one asks serious questions about the subject of all this attention. And one needs to be circumspect about forming and passing one's own views concerning VT as well! What is immediately apparent is this, that while Frame's book might not be entirely satisfactory, it cannot be just shoved aside, either. Therefore we respectfully beg to differ with Mr. Punford's statement: "I am astonished that Frame considers Van Til difficult to understand," on the grounds that the overall evidence suggests to us that perhaps, with respect, Mr. Punford himself has as yet only partially understood VT.

⁴ Cf. C. Van Til *Common Grace and the Gospel* (P&R 1972) page 232. This sounds very close to saying "my lack of clarity is due to a lack of clarity in Scripture", if, in fact, it does not actually say precisely that. But the statement is frankly a salient indicator of a vital component in VT's epistemology, of which, see later.

"Kuyperian" common grace, I understand VT shook the General Synod of Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1947. That denomination had espoused Kuyperian Common Grace officially in 1924 with the Three Points they flung at Herman Hoeksema. By 1947 the CRC were effectively adopting Heppe's modified view on Common Grace, which VT described as being "virtually to accept the really contradictory. It at least approaches the idea that the same ultimate will of God wills, and yet wills not, the salvation of sinners."⁵ The reader might well reflect on this, and note how close VT seems to come to Hoeksema's position here. And that Heppe's position has become the de facto "received dogma" amongst modern Calvinists the world over. Well, in 1947, VT said at their General Synod that espousal of Heppe's doctrine of common grace in the CRC was like trying "to blow up the science building with an atom bomb".⁶ He later apologised for *saying* this, though it is evident from his book *"Common Grace and the Gospel"* (hereinafter CG&G, published P&R 1972) that he never changed his opinion! And it happens that having written certain critiques of Hoeksema, in his later years VT seemed to come round to finding the PRC doctrine more amenable.⁷ In fact, as far as I can understand VT in his book CG&G, his whole position on common grace is a massive shift away from Kuyper & Co. and off in the direction of Hoeksema. Just how close he approaches Hoeksema is a matter that I am not prepared to argue at the moment, except to say that at *some* points the difference between the two men seems to me, at least, to be a matter of differing definitions of the same terms. Maybe if VT had gone back to exegesis directly himself, he might well have escaped the clutches of the "Westminster" paradox doctrine promulgated by Murray and Stonehouse, and come over wholly to the side of Hoeksema on this issue. Certainly in his later years he entertained great friendships with theologians on the Hoeksema side, and intimated his appreciation of Hoeksema's writings.⁸

But now, with regard to Mr. Punford's criticism, that I land VT in "the same neo-Hegelian quagmire as Barth and Brunner....." First, VT himself had to put out disclaimers on this account. In just one volume, (CG&G) he seems at times "haunted" by the similarity of his "system" to that of the Dialectics. Right in the Preface to CG&G he says:

"On the surface, and by the sound of words, all this might seem to indicate a neo-orthodox (as per Barth & Brunner, the "Dialectics". *Ed.*) approach to the question of God....etc."⁹

⁵ Van Til: *Common Grace and the Gospel* p.76. See too on p. 77 where VT asserts: "there are no two ultimate wills in God contradicting each other." Also he quotes Calvin in support where Calvin refutes Pighius who argued from the Universality of the Gospel call to the conclusion that God wants all men to be saved. (Cf. Calvin's Calvinism: transl. H. Cole Sovereign Grace Union edition: page 100.)

⁶ Op. Cit. page 195.

⁷ Frame: Op. Cit. page 216 notes how VT was too young in 1924 to have been involved in the debate over Hoeksema and the "Three Points", and that VT had "friends on both sides of the controversy", and that VT "regretted the divisiveness of it". Also that in his later writings on Common Grace VT tried to "get beyond the standard positions on either side and to make some real progress in theological understanding."

⁸ In CG&G see p.221, where VT says re. Hoeksema's "Reformed Dogmatics": "There is, indeed, much very valuable material in his work", and this, notwithstanding certain criticisms he had made of it. Also I am given to understand from a first hand and reliable source, that in later years Hoeksema's exposition of Revelation was of great comfort to VT.

⁹ Van Til: *Common Grace and the Gospel* : p. v. Note the disclaimer "On the surface....might seem.."

Again he says:

"Our position is naturally charged with being self-contradictory. It might seem at first glance as though we were willing, with the dialectical theologians, to accept the really contradictory."¹⁰

Yet again, in another tell-tale admission with regard to the Christian gaining knowledge of God from the Word of God:

"The Christian idea is therefore the recognition that the creature can only touch the hem of the garment of Him who dwells in light that no man can approach to."¹¹

Compare this last one to Karl Barth directly who says concerning the Word of God coming to us in revelation, that it is the "pointing finger" as it were, of "John the Baptist", and that is all the "word" can do, is point. It can tell us actually nothing about the incomprehensible *what* it is pointing to.¹² I think you will agree that VT's conception of Scripture as "hem of garment" is perilously close to Barth's "pointing finger" here. For VT then, the epistemological role Scripture fulfills looks astonishingly similar to that found in Barth.

That said, VT is nevertheless a believer, contra the Dialectics, in the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God. For the Dialectics, the writers of Scripture "can be at fault in every word, and they have been at fault in every word."¹³ Hence they see the Bible as a mass of **real contradictions** and errors. But for VT, God can never be in error, God's Truth can never be contradictory, or at least, God's Truth can never be *really* contradictory, though it may well look like it to us. And here comes the rub. Here is where VT lands himself in the "neo-Hegelian quagmire" with the Dialectics. Like them, he insists that Scripture is full of contradictions. But whereas the Dialectics, in line with their Critical Modernist epistemology, affirm these contradictions as being **real**, VT says that they are only **apparent**. From hereon, the profile of VT's epistemology virtually clones Barthianism, in fact, it is arguably "baptised dialecticism". And Neo-Hegelian. Notice that, I said NEO Hegelian, not as Mr. Punford seems to have thought: "Hegelian". He goes on to defend Hegel in his letter.....I'm not interested, neo-Hegelianism is not a faithful reduplicate of the original Hegel, and it's neo-Hegelianism I am talking about. Whilst the Dialectics picked up the same triadic principles of Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis, that Hegel in turn picked up out of Kant's *Transcendental Logic*, they depart Hegel in the actual usage and development of those terms. In neo-Hegelianism, a concept "A" can simultaneously and in all respects be "not-A". This is because their epistemological work peculiarly confronts the problem of the Infinite-finite gulf between God and man. Finite man cannot comprehend anything of the Infinite God, they say. God is "wholly other". And because of this Infinite-finite dichotomy all the words of Scripture are finite human "words-about-God" which can only, from the nature of the case, be full of errors and contradictions. From this the Dialectics develop their peculiar "tension" theology, which requires one to believe polar opposites simultaneously, and virtually irrationally, thereby inducing a total suspension of the rational powers, and inducing

¹⁰ Op. cit. page 9. Note the disclaimer "at first glance". As we shall see, it all goes much, much deeper than merely a matter of surface resemblances.

¹¹ Cf. CG&G page 11.

¹² Cf. Karl Barth: *Church Dogmatics*: (ET of *Kirkliche Dogmatiek*, Publ. Edinburgh, T & T Clark) Vol 1, part 1, page 127.

¹³ Barth: Op. cit. Vol. 1 part 2, pages 529-530.

some kind of mystic "religious experience" (Brunner called it a "Divine-human Encounter") which, because it is an experience of the Infinite One, can never, in principle, be put into finite words without producing a mass of errors and contradictions. *Real* contradictions!

Right at this point VT is "beating in time" with the Dialectics. For him too, the human language of Scripture is full of contradictions. Except he calls them "apparent" contradictions, thereby protecting his Confessional belief in Scripture as the Word of God. Let us hear him:

"ALL TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE IS APPARENTLY CONTRADICTORY."¹⁴

And:

"All the truths of the Christian Religion **have of necessity** the appearance of being contradictory..... We do not fear to accept that which has the appearance of being contradictory."¹⁵

Then:

"Faith **abhors** the really contradictory: to maintain the really contradictory is to deny God. Faith **adores** the apparently contradictory; to adore the apparently contradictory is to adore God as one's creator and final interpreter."¹⁶

One word separates VT from the Dialectics here, it's "apparently".

For at this point, like the Dialectics, VT too is coping with the problem of finite humanity comprehending the Infinite Divinity. Unlike the Dialectics, VT allows that God does communicate *something* within the form of Scripture, though, let us remind ourselves again, his concept of the communication delivered therein looks perilously Barthian... "hem of garment" is all it is, he says, as compared to Barth's "pointing finger". And like the Dialectics, VT insists that the "words-about-God" we comprehend in Scripture "have of necessity" the *appearance* of contradictions, because of the Infinite-finite dichotomy. But what is VT's warrant for saying that these "contradictions" are only "apparent"? And not "real"? To know that a "contradiction" is only apparent presupposes that you know something about it which resolves the problem. Take the example of a "paradox" which Mr. Punford presents in his letter, that "Scripture itself states so clearly, the natural man both **knows**, and **does not know** God." The "contradiction" here is one that arises because of a faulty translation and appreciation of the nuances in the verb "to know". All semblance of "contradiction" collapses when one appreciates that in the first usage "know" means: "to be aware of, have cognisance of", whereas in the second instance it means "to have intimate friendship with", and both nuances of "know" are to be found in the Bible. So we know, from this information, that the "contradiction" in the sentence is only "apparent". If this is all VT is concerned about, however, well, all his "contradictions" can be dissolved, by a little exegetical study. But there's nothing of VT's "necessary" appearance of contradiction involved at all in such an example. But no, like the Dialectics, VT believes there are contradictions in Scripture which no amount of exegetic research can ever resolve, because *in principle*, because of the Infinite-finite divide and the inadequacies of human thought and language, "contradictions" must of necessity appear in the "Words-about-God" or Scriptures. Contradictions which only God can resolve. And these contradictions VT says: "we embrace with passion".¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. CG&G page 142. Title of a subsection in Capitals.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* page 165. All emphases mine.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* page 67. All emphases mine.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* page 9.

For VT, as for the Dialectics, coming to God must involve the conscious imbibing of contradictions. The idea that these contradictions are only apparent does not solve the problem, for they are necessarily built in to the Infinite-finite dichotomy, and VT's "apparent" contradictions are therefore in principle as *intractible* as Barth's "real contradictions". And therefore in practical terms, coming to God in VT's terms means a "leap of faith" every bit as much as the Dialectics require. For Barth, you must "swallow the contradictions and hold the two disparate poles in tension...." For VT you must swallow the contradictions "with passion" and actually "adore them"! Shockingly, whereas for Barth the contradictions turn out as a sort of handy "convenience" which has the effect of launching us off in an act of suspending rationality and simply trusting, for VT **they are a focus of adoration!** And, says VT, "to adore the apparently contradictory is to adore God as one's creator and final interpreter". Hence these "contradictions" emerge for VT as ontologically necessary for facilitating our worship of the Most High! Worse, if God, in this, is for VT the "final interpreter", then VT would have to admit that He is a "final interpreter" who of necessity, on VT's terms, can never tell us the "interpretation" because of that Infinite-finite problem....a factor which will still prevail for us in the Post-Resurrection state. In which case, *how* is He our "final interpreter"? He would be a "final interpreter" who never "finally interprets" !!!!

Again, to know that any contradiction is only apparent, one must know something about the whole situation that "gives the game away." For instance, consider this conundrum:

When butter goes off, and smells foul, the *foul smell* is partly caused by the chemical compound **propanoic acid**, the molecular formula is $C_3H_6O_2$. The same compound is active in the *foul smell* of stale sweat.

In the food industry the chemical compound **ethyl methanoate** is often added because it has a *pleasant aroma* that enhances flavouring. The molecular formula is $C_3H_6O_2$.

What ? $C_3H_6O_2$? The same chemical simultaneously both a *pleasant* smell **and** a *foul* smell? Is this a contradiction that we just have to swallow as an act of faith? Or should we look more closely at the whole thing? What will a scientist tell us?

First, in real life, our experience shouts at us that two different compounds *must* be in view here. It is this "functional veracity" at the ontological level of real experience that warns of some inadequacy in the analysis which produces the molecular formulae. Herein lies the difference between a "real" contradiction, and an "apparent" contradiction. A "real" contradiction has its polar tension ontologically in our experience of real life. Thereby we know it as a "real" contradiction, because it is void of "functional veracity" at this ontological level. Like saying: "a square circle".

Knowing then that our chemical conundrum is no contradiction in real life, we now deduce that the tension must be in our formulaic representation. $C_3H_6O_2$ is not telling *all* the truth. Pressing the analysis deeper, from the levels of "molecular" formulations, and reaching the more sophisticated level of "structural" formulae, we discover that it is the *arrangement* of the elemental atoms that is **crucial**, and makes the difference, thus:

Propanoic acid : CH_3CH_2COOH

Ethyl methanoate: $HCOOC_2H_5$

They look different now, don't they? The "contradiction" has gone..... We have discovered the "principial veracity" which we knew must underlie "functional veracity". It was our appreciation of chemical formulation that was lacking, and led to the contradiction appearing. We needed to press deeper from the initial levels of "*molecular*" formulae, and penetrate

the concepts of "*structural*" formulae.¹⁸

Now, firstly, any "apparent" contradictions in Scripture that our exegesis throws up ought to be suspected. We know, a priori, that God does not tell lies. Hence if our exegesis yields a string of contradictions then we should first suspect much our exegetical work, just as there was something deficient about our first chemical formulation of the two "isomers" above.

But for VT, such methodology is something of a non-starter, primarily for the reason that as he himself admitted, he was "lacking in exegesis" in "all his work". For him to ask searching questions concerning the validity of the exegesis of his colleagues at Westminster Seminary would have been to cast serious doubts on their professional ability and/or integrity. And when one considers that those colleagues of his at Westminster, Murray and Stonehouse, were committed headlong to Common Grace and the Free Offer of the Gospel, and the notion of "apparent contradictions" in Scripture, it could only work out that VT would proceed resting his weight entirely on their biased and faulty presuppositions.

Also, for VT, "contradiction" is, as we have seen, a "necessary" component of Divine revelation of the Infinite to the finite. And because of that Infinite-finite dichotomy, none of those "contradictions" are, in principle, ever resolvable to the human mind. Thus we see another reason which would deter VT from suspecting the logic in any exegesis that threw up a contradiction. *Contradiction is what he expects faithful exegesis to produce.* Contradiction is what he wants, Contradiction is what he needs in order to fully "adore God". And it will not do to trumpet out that word "apparent" in this respect. For VT's "apparent" contradictions are as ontologically necessary, and as ontologically built in to the fabric of revelation as Barth's "real" contradictions are. "Real" or "apparent", they are both in human terms *intractable*, and by VT's principles *must in principle* ever remain so.¹⁹

In summary, I would posit that VT cannot "know" that his contradictions are only apparent, but can only "assume" them to be so, using the doctrine of the Veracity of God as the foundation in this formulation. As such he is doing what he derides others for doing, deducing one doctrine logically from another. However, in reasoning this way VT goes upside down to our normal method of resolving real-life "apparent" contradictions. Normally we experience functional veracity ontologically, and the "contradiction" at the rational analysis level, due to inadequate reasoning. This was exemplified above in the matter of the two chemicals. But for VT the "apparent contradictions" of the Scripture are *necessarily* on the ontological level of the written revelation, and his mode of resolution is to *assume* principial veracity at some rational level beyond the possibilities of human comprehension. Thus he connects "principial veracity" to a phenomenon void of "functional veracity."

Again, it must be asked: If the Revelation of God necessarily contains contradictions, then how can it be a Revelation of God, seeing that there are no contradictions in God? To attempt to answer this one by interpolating the word "apparent" will not do. For there are no "apparent" contradictions in God either. One way or the other, VT's conception of Divine Revelation lands him in the Neo-Hegelian quagmire, the Bible as the Word of God does not, and can not, reveal a consistent picture of God to poor humans, it is, to put it blunter than VT

¹⁸ I am indebted to the BRF chairman Mr. Brian Harris B.Sc., for his scientific expertise in helping me to understand this "chemical conundrum" concerning "isomers" ("Iso = same + "mer" = part).

¹⁹ As such it is arguable that VT is practically embroiling a believer into the same suspension of the rational faculties as is required by Dialectical theology. Practically, what's the difference between believing in "real" and therefore ontologically intractable contradictions, and believing in "apparent" contradictions which are just as ontologically real and just as intractable so far as humans are concerned?

would ever have dared, contradictory, defective, deficient, and *necessarily* so.....in VT's very own words it's but "the hem of His garment".²⁰

This leads on to the matter of "mystery". VT is big on this, he says:

"It follows that in everything with which we deal, we are, in the last analysis, dealing with this Infinite God, this God who hideth Himself, this mysterious God. In everything that we handle we deal finally with the incomprehensible God.....**At every point we run into mystery.** All our ingenuity will not aid us in seeking to avoid this mystery. All our ingenuity cannot exhaust the humanly inexhaustible rationality of God. To seek to present the Christian position as rationally explicable in the sense of being comprehensible to the mind of man is to defeat our own purposes." ²¹

One cannot but suspect that lurking under here is the "mystic experientialism" which is the "Archimedian point" underlying modern Evangelicalism and Calvinism. As such they evince a common epistemological profile with the Dialectics. For VT, as well as the Dialectics, belief must involve suspension of the rationality on this showing.

True, the Bible does teach "mysteries". But "mysteries" are in a different category altogether to contradictions. It is a mystery to me how this computer works, but I know that because my ontological experience of it shows it to be working, then there are no internal contradictions in the logic that makes it work. Even if that logic is, for the moment, beyond the parameters of my education. But if the computer manifested a failure ontologically, I would know then that there was defective logic at work on the inside. So we experience the truth of God. The Trinity may be to us a "mystery", but what it is not is a contradiction, indeed a study of both the Bible and of the book of reality will yield the indubitable conviction that Trinitarianism is necessarily true. Ontologically, and logically. VT admits this very thing.²² From this ontological base of "knowing that it works" we may infer indubitably that it is logical, even if we can't see all the logic now. But this is far from putting forth any idea that the Trinity is a contradiction, be it "real" or "apparent". In other words, contradiction, paradox, and mystery have to be carefully distinguished, and not, as it seems to me VT was doing, at least in CG&G, subsumed under a general blanket of "apparent contradiction". Vital here too, is the fact that any further revelation from God concerning Himself will not ever "contradict" what He has already said about Himself. If such were to be the case, then we could not trust what revelation we already have. And the qualification "apparent" is no help in such a situation. The human subject is as stymied rationally by "apparent" as by "real" when the "apparent contradiction" is in principle, as per VT, humanly intractible. In the end, I ask what is the difference between VT's "apparent" contradictions, and "real" ones?

Amazingly, to ram home his teaching, VT turned to John Calvin. Yes! To Calvin, who writing his antidote to the Canons of Trent, said with respect to Canon VI, "I abhor paradox"! ²³ How does VT find support in Calvin? In CG&G, page 142, under the heading: "ALL TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE IS APPARENTLY CONTRADICTORY" we find this:

"Rather let us say with Calvin: 'And most certainly there is nothing in the whole circle of spiritual doctrine which does not far surpass the capacity of man and confound its utmost reach.'"

The reference is to the Cole edition of "Calvin's Calvinism" page 82. However, it is inter-

²⁰ Van Til: CG&G p.11.

²¹ Op. Cit. p. 10 emphasis mine.

²² Ibid. page 9.

²³ Cf. Calvin's Selected Works: Tracts Vol 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1983) p. 149.

esting to look up this reference, and to quote the whole statement of Calvin at this point....viz.,

"In Matthew, our Saviour separates and distinguishes His disciples from the common mass of men. He declares that it was given to them (His disciples) to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but that He spoke to others in parables, that hearing, they might hear and not understand, that the saying of Isaiah might be fulfilled. Now I am willing to confess that those to whom Christ spoke parabolically were unworthy, in themselves, of greater light. But, on the other hand, I would wish to ask, what greater merit, in themselves, had the apostles to be freely admitted into familiarity with Christ? into which familiarity Christ did freely admit them. Here the antithesis is clearly established, that grace was freely conferred on few, when it might have been with justice denied equally to all. For shall we say that the apostles procured for themselves, by their own merits, that which the Lord declares was freely 'given' to them? Nor are we to pass by without particular remark that the Saviour terms the things which He taught them 'mysteries.' **And most certainly there is nothing in the whole circle of spiritual doctrine which does not far surpass the capacity of man and confound its utmost reach.** No explanation by words, therefore, however lucid, will suffice to make the mysteries of the kingdom of God understood, *unless the Holy Spirit, at the same time, teach within.* But Christ would have his disciples to magnify it, as a precious pledge of the favour of God toward them, that He honoured them above the common mass of men in blessing them with the external means of teaching. Though He was, all the while, gradually leading them to that high and singular privilege which distinguishes "friends" from "servants", as John hath it (John 15 : 15):

"Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." **These friends are thus taught from above to the very end, that they might understand those things which are beyond all natural comprehension.** ²⁴ (Emph. Ed.)

The reader might well compare the whole passage with the snippet VT chopped out to suit his own purposes. The snippet is shown highlighted in the full quote, as also is the final sentence which flatly contradicts VT's own philosophy. For Calvin, the mystery of God is revealed in Christ to those who are taught by His Spirit, *it is for those left without* that God remains a mystery. But for VT, the truth of God *is still as much a mystery for believers!*

This is a gross misrepresentation of the teaching of John Calvin by VT here. Granted, at the juncture at which he uses the quote, he is talking about witnessing to the godless. But he nevertheless completely misapplies the Calvin passage, for within his context, VT is here advocating that the Christian in witnessing to the godless should be unashamed to present Christian truth as a mass of contradictions. His assertion elsewhere that the Christian should "embrace" such apparent contradictions "with passion" is further evidence that he was using Calvin as a justification for viewing Christian dogma as essentially beyond the comprehensibility of the Christian as well as that of the godless.

Let me conclude by saying that analysis of VT's thought is not easy. Maybe I need correction in some of the views expressed above. But I am wary of VT's effective "baptised Kantianism." Too much of old Princeton lurks here, this imbibing of worldly-wise philosophers and dangerous pressing of their "insights" into Christian service. (Common Grace again?) But of all this, DV, more anon.

²⁴ Calvin's Calvinism: ET by Henry Cole (London: Sovereign Grace Union 1927) pp. 82-83.