

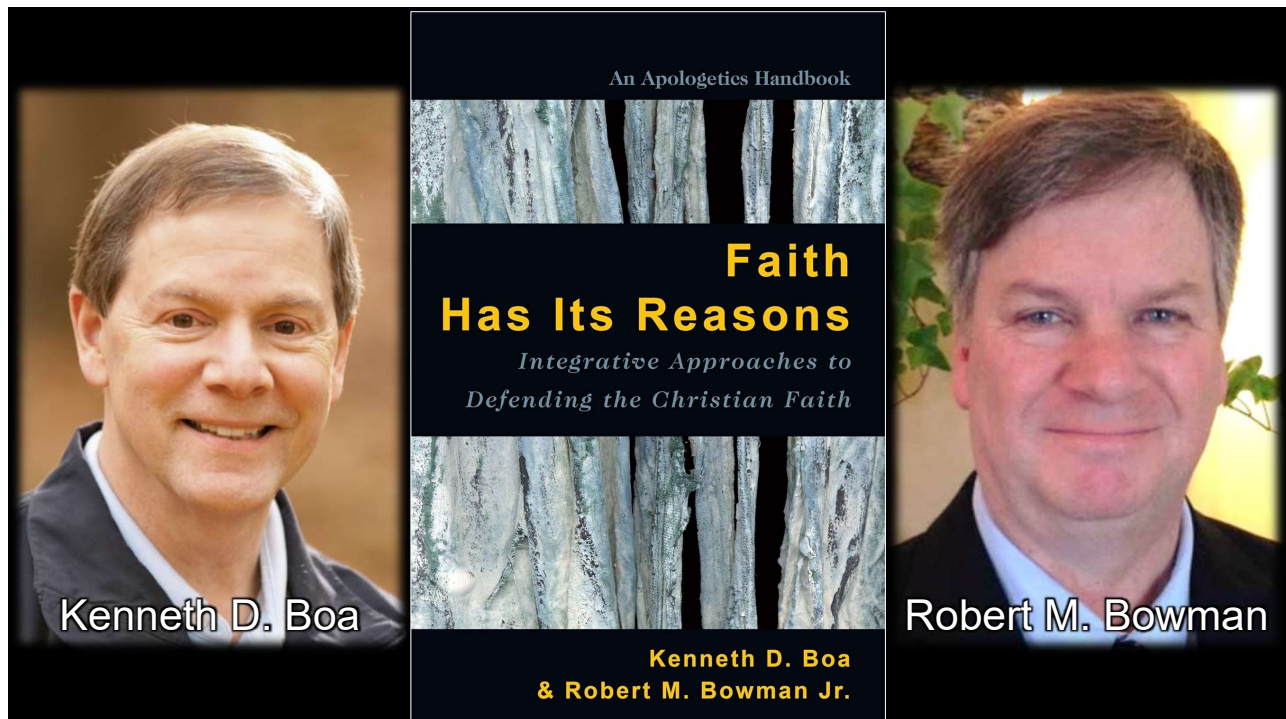
Christian Apologetic Systems

∞ 07: Presuppositionalism Pt. 1 ∞ Introduction

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

Provost

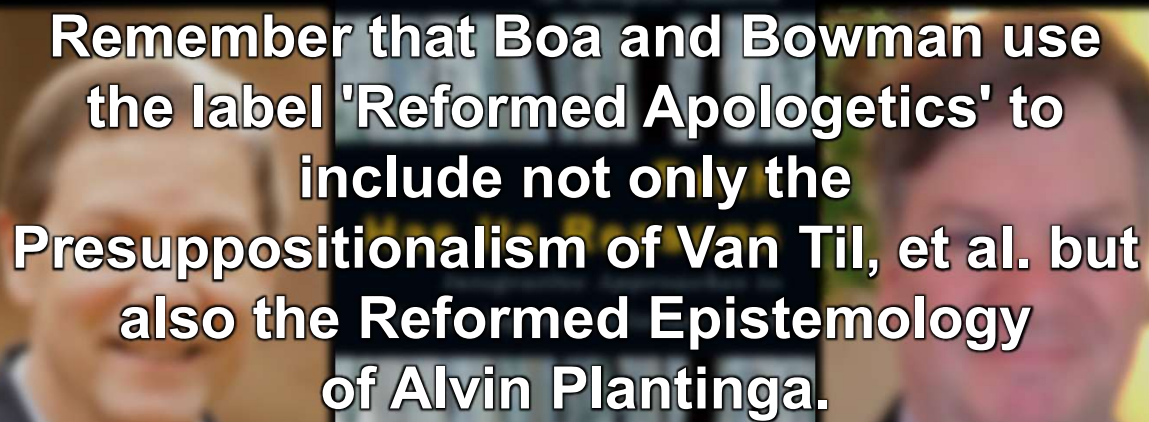
Norman L. Geisler Chair of Christian Apologetics
Southern Evangelical Seminary
Rock Hill, South Carolina, USA



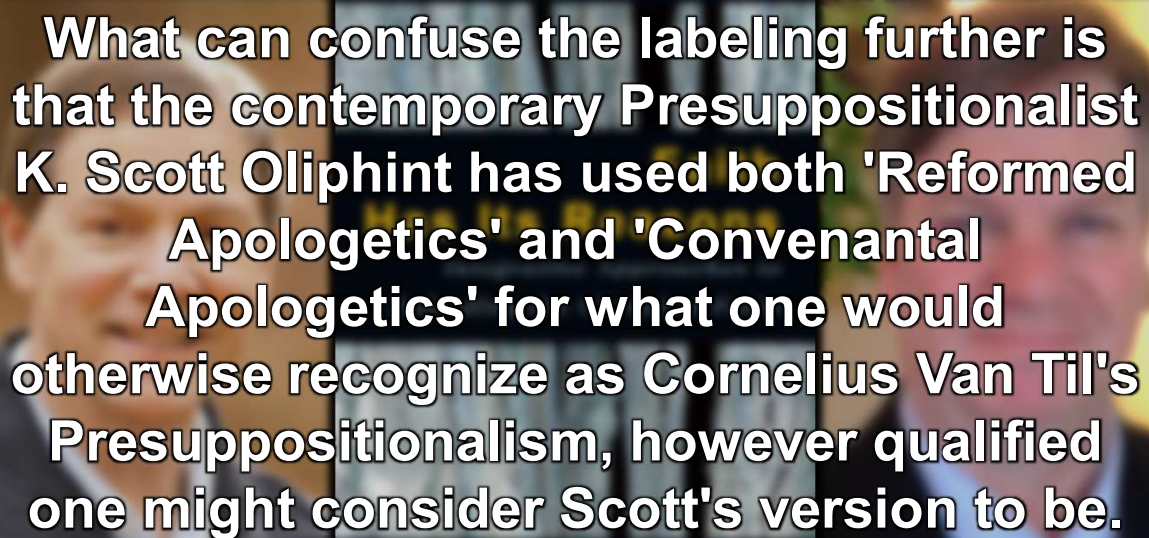
Kenneth D. Boa

Robert M. Bowman

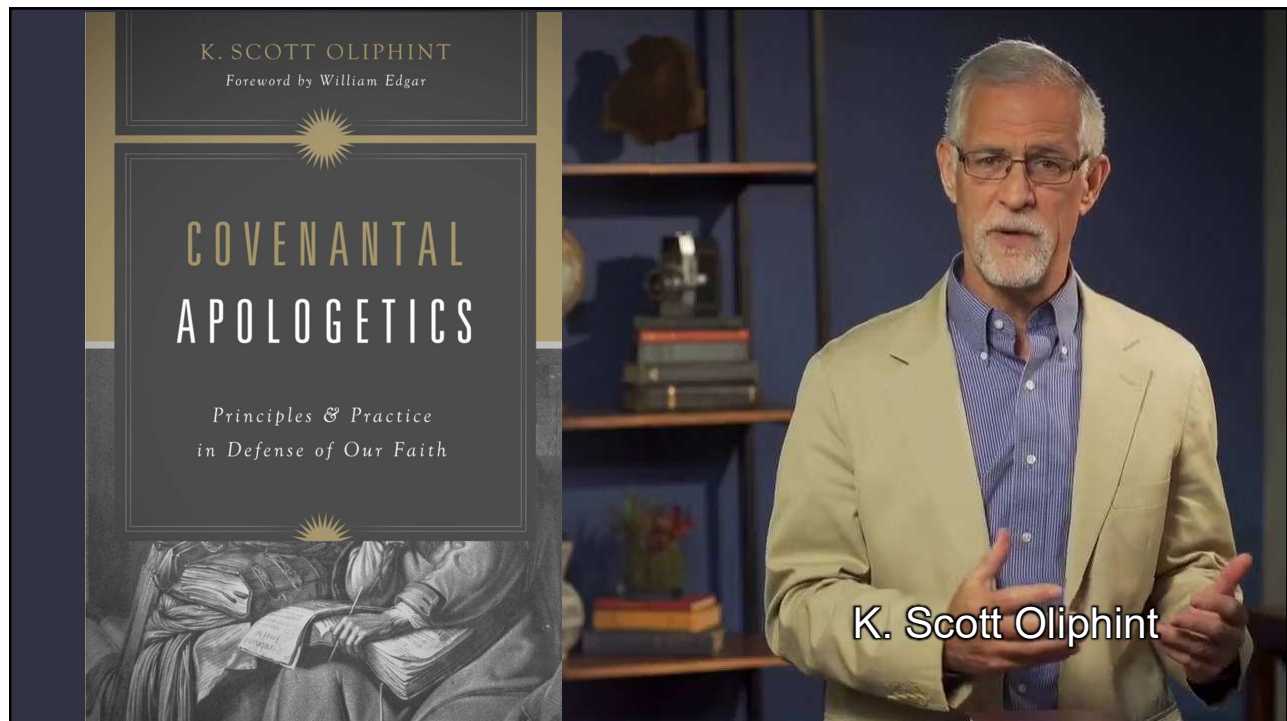
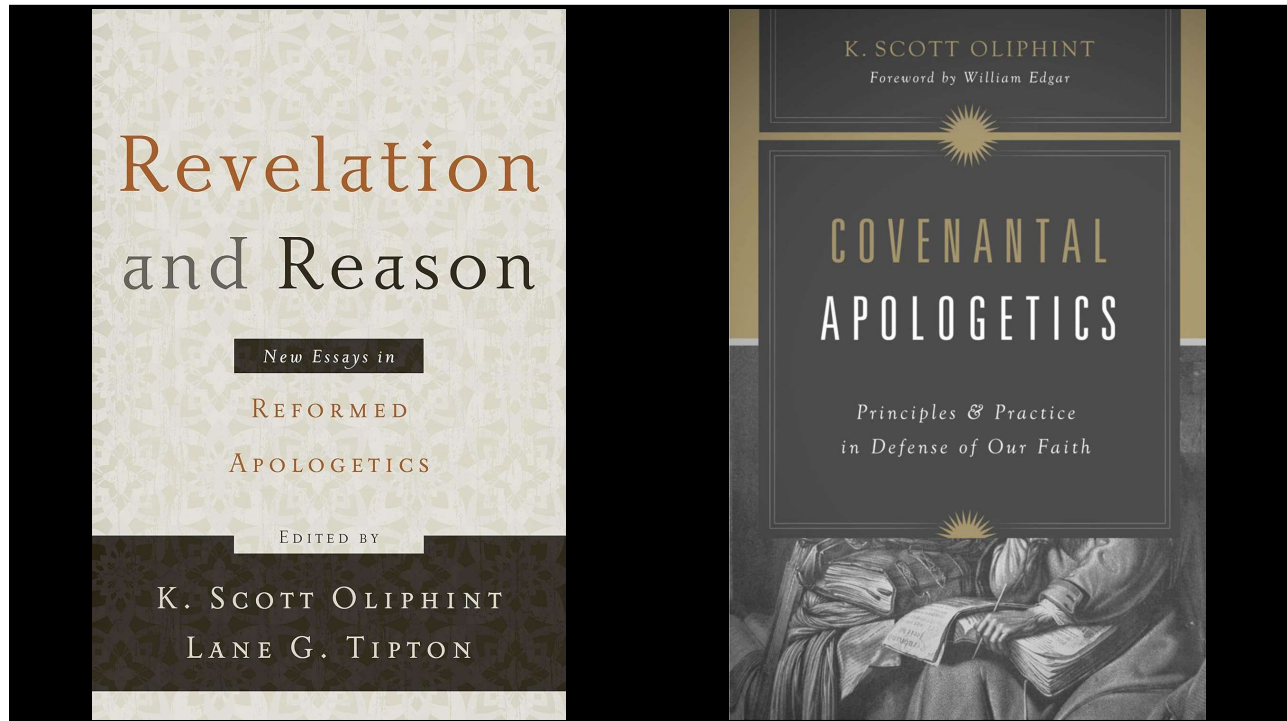
Kenneth D. Boa
& Robert M. Bowman Jr.

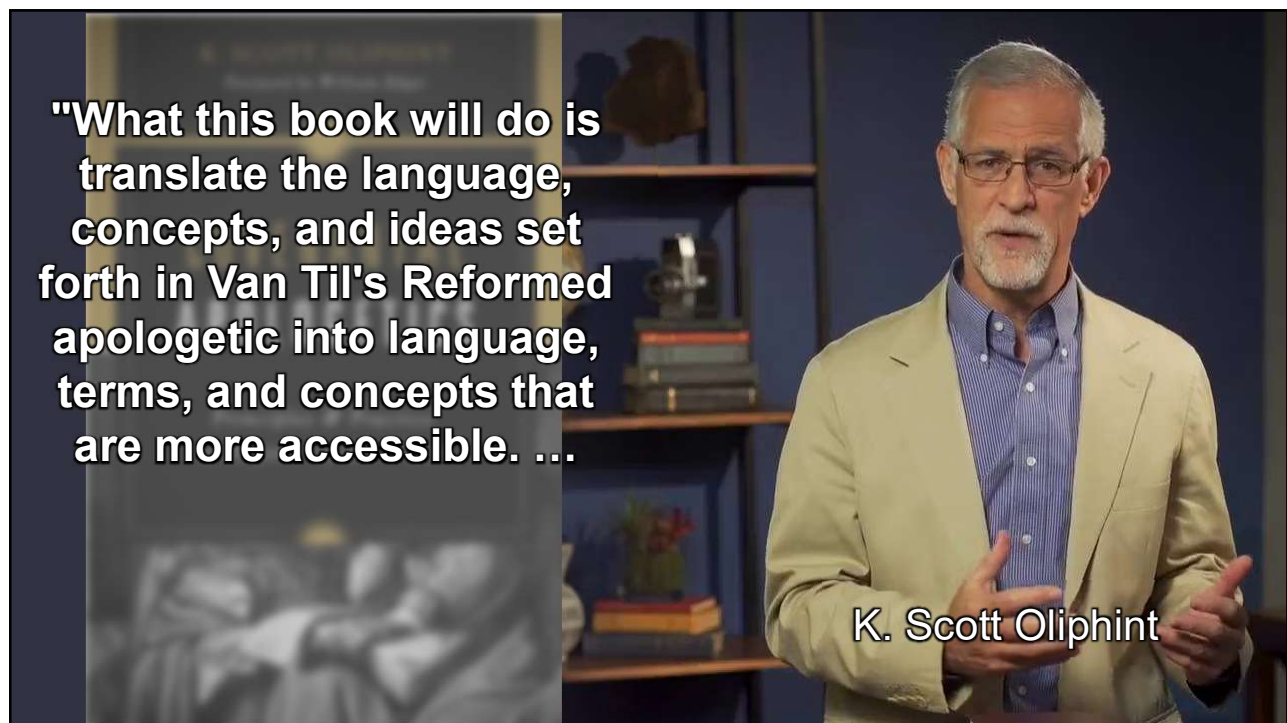
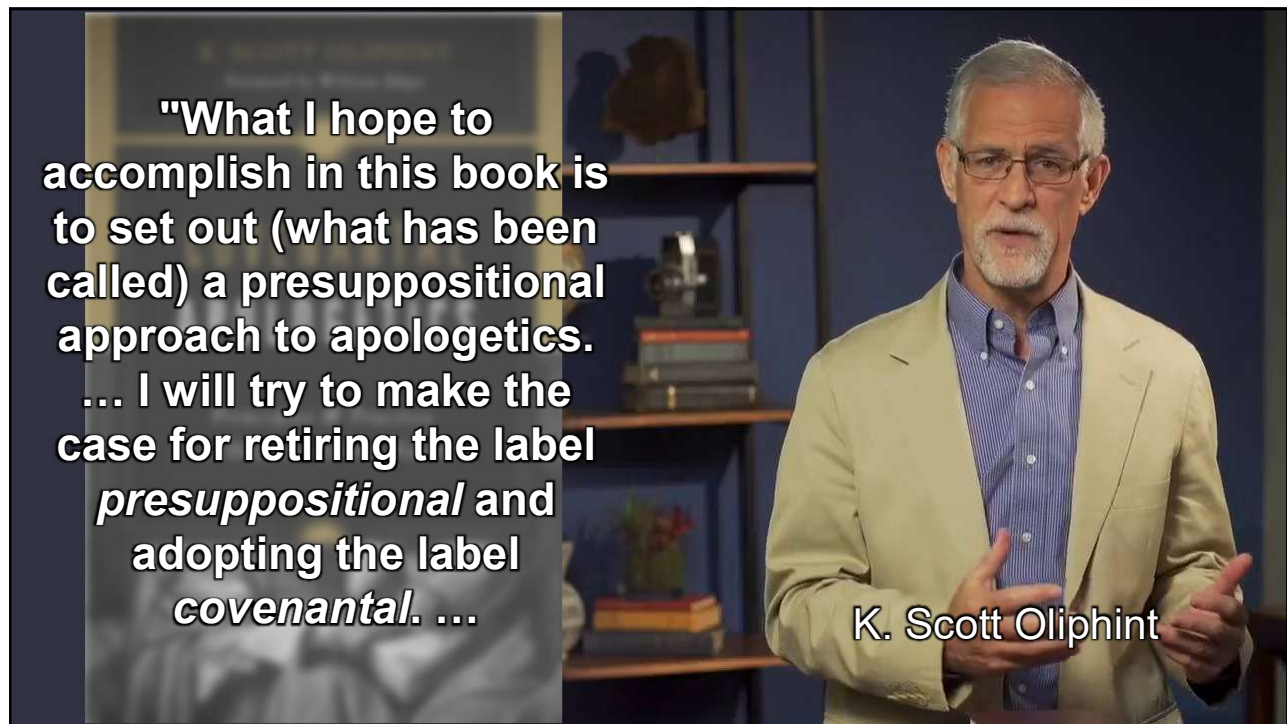


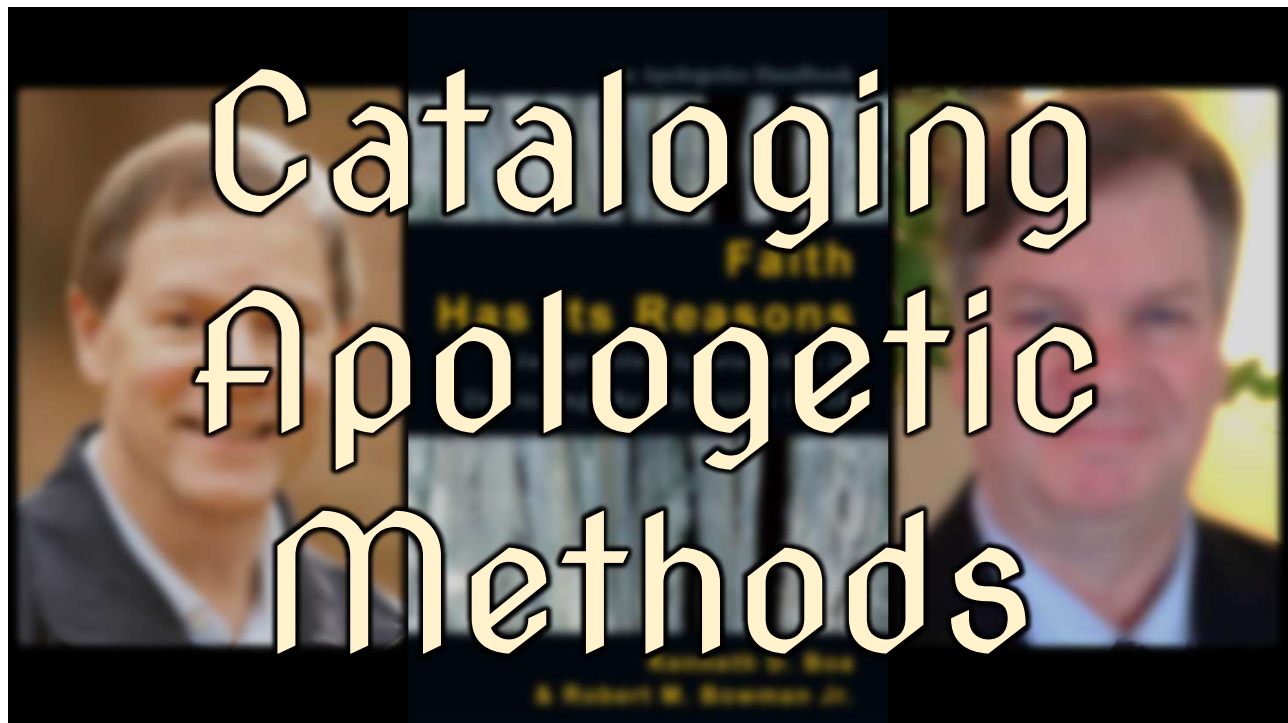
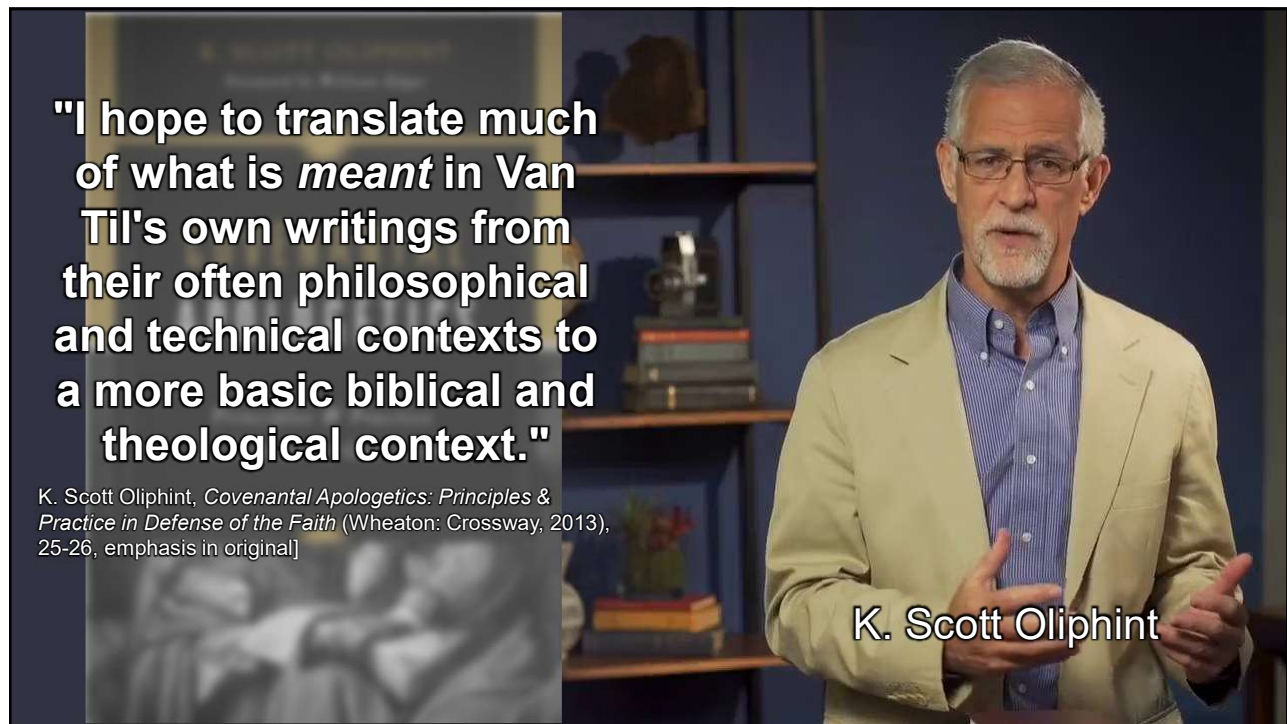
Remember that Boa and Bowman use the label 'Reformed Apologetics' to include not only the Presuppositionalism of Van Til, et al. but also the Reformed Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga.



What can confuse the labeling further is that the contemporary Presuppositionalist K. Scott Oliphint has used both 'Reformed Apologetics' and 'Covenantal Apologetics' for what one would otherwise recognize as Cornelius Van Til's Presuppositionalism, however qualified one might consider Scott's version to be.

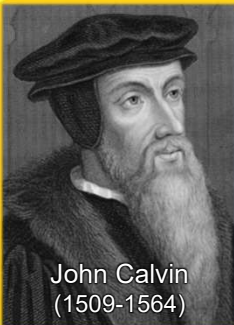




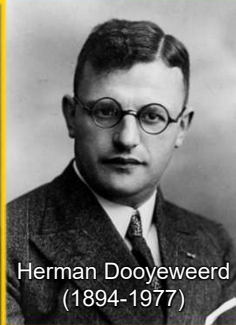


According to Boa / Bowman *Faith Has Its Reasons*

❖ *Reformed: God Said It*



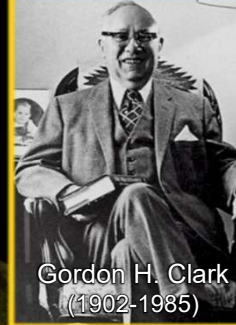
John Calvin
(1509-1564)



Herman Dooyeweerd
(1894-1977)



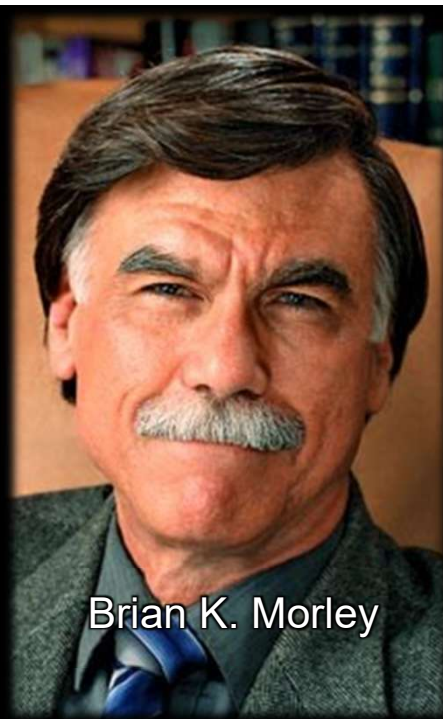
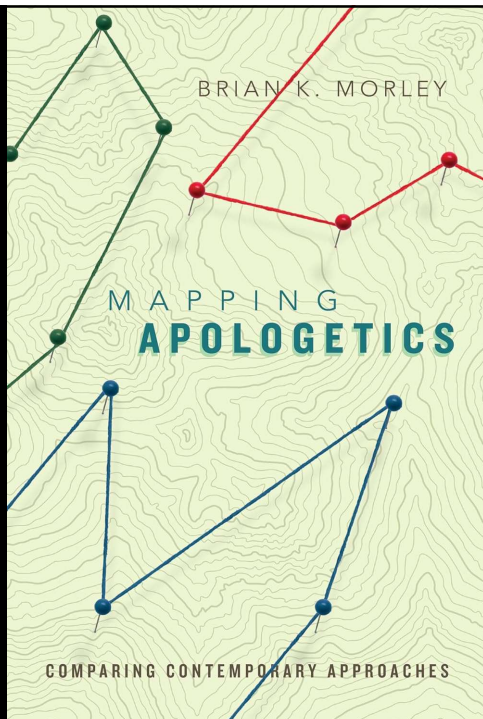
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



Gordon H. Clark
(1902-1985)



Alvin Plantinga



Brian K. Morley

According to Brian K. Morley *Mapping Apologetics*

❖ *Presuppositionalism*

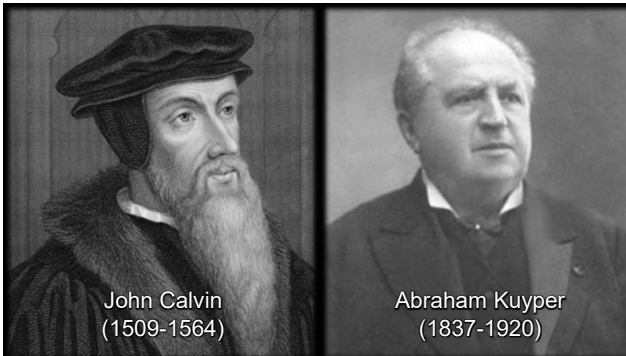


Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

John Frame

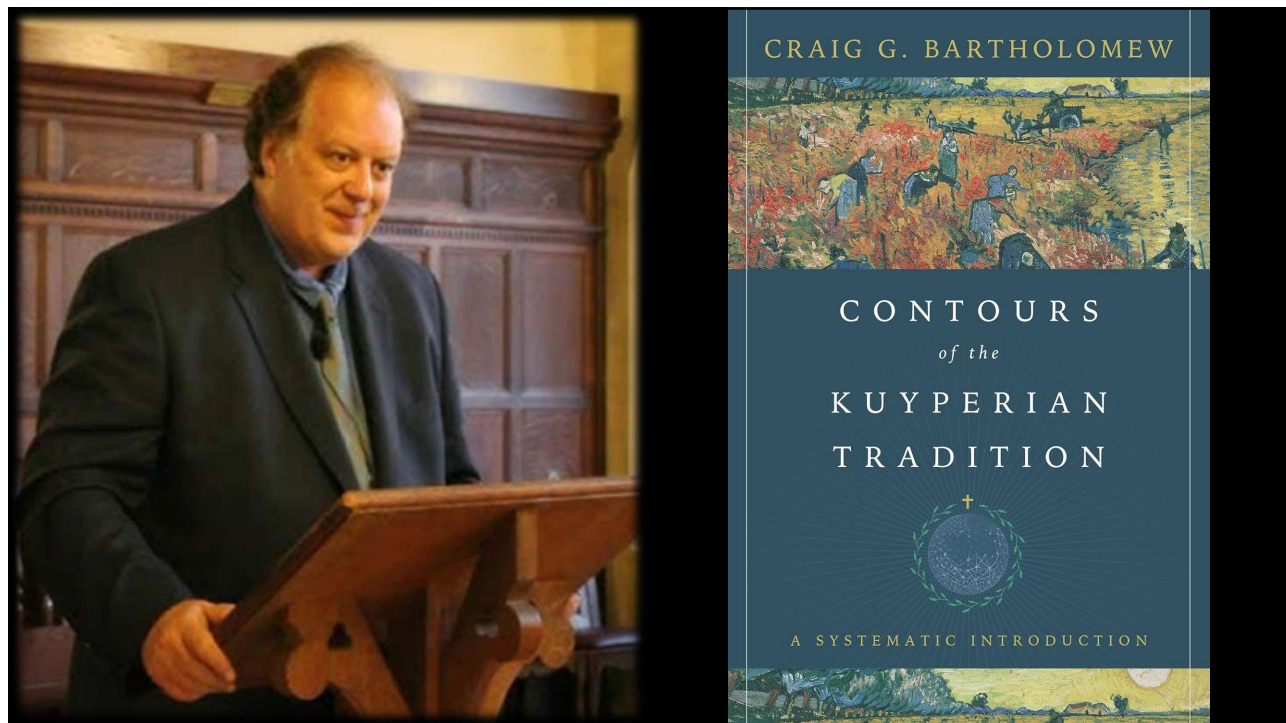
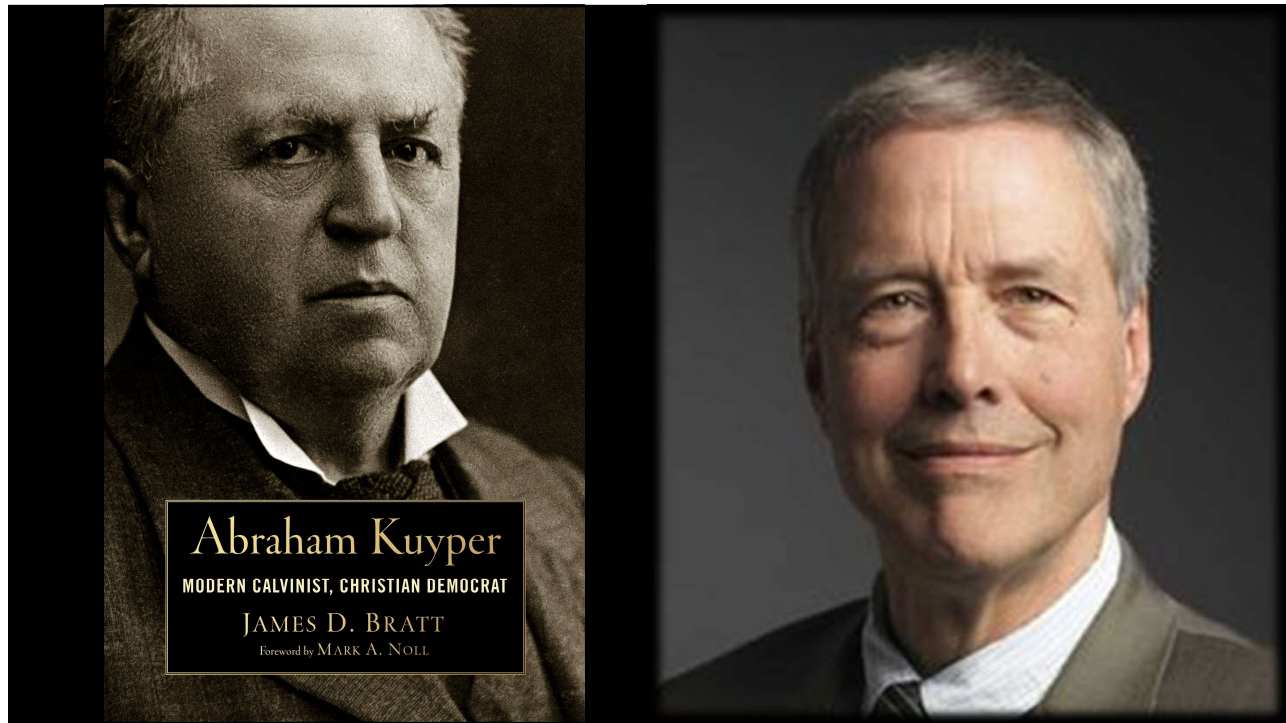
Historical Roots of Presuppositional Apologetics

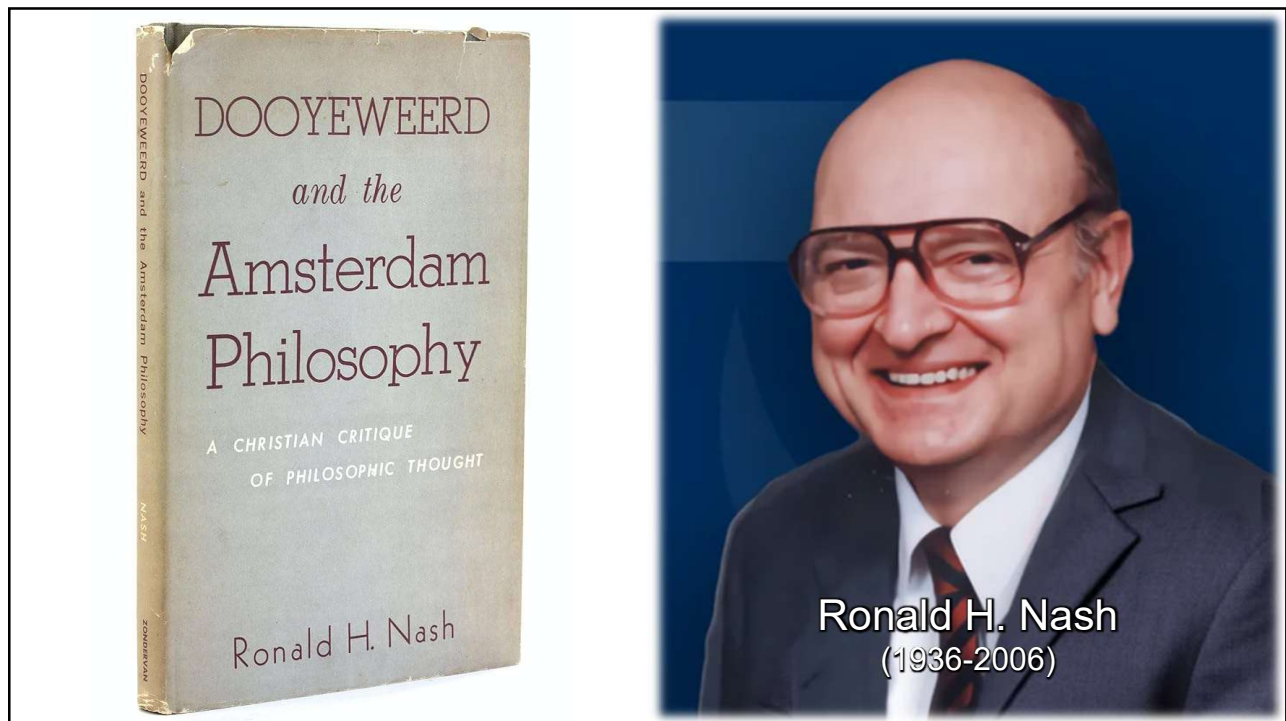
Influences

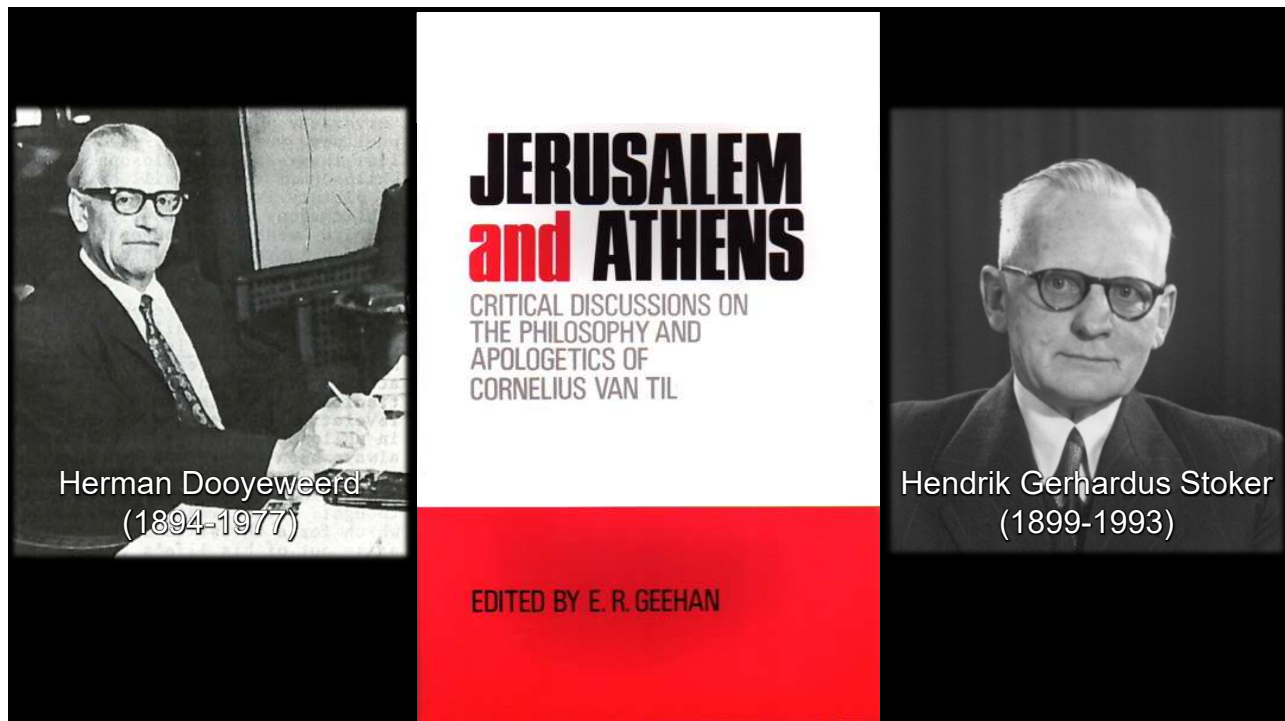


John Calvin
(1509-1564)

Abraham Kuyper
(1837-1920)

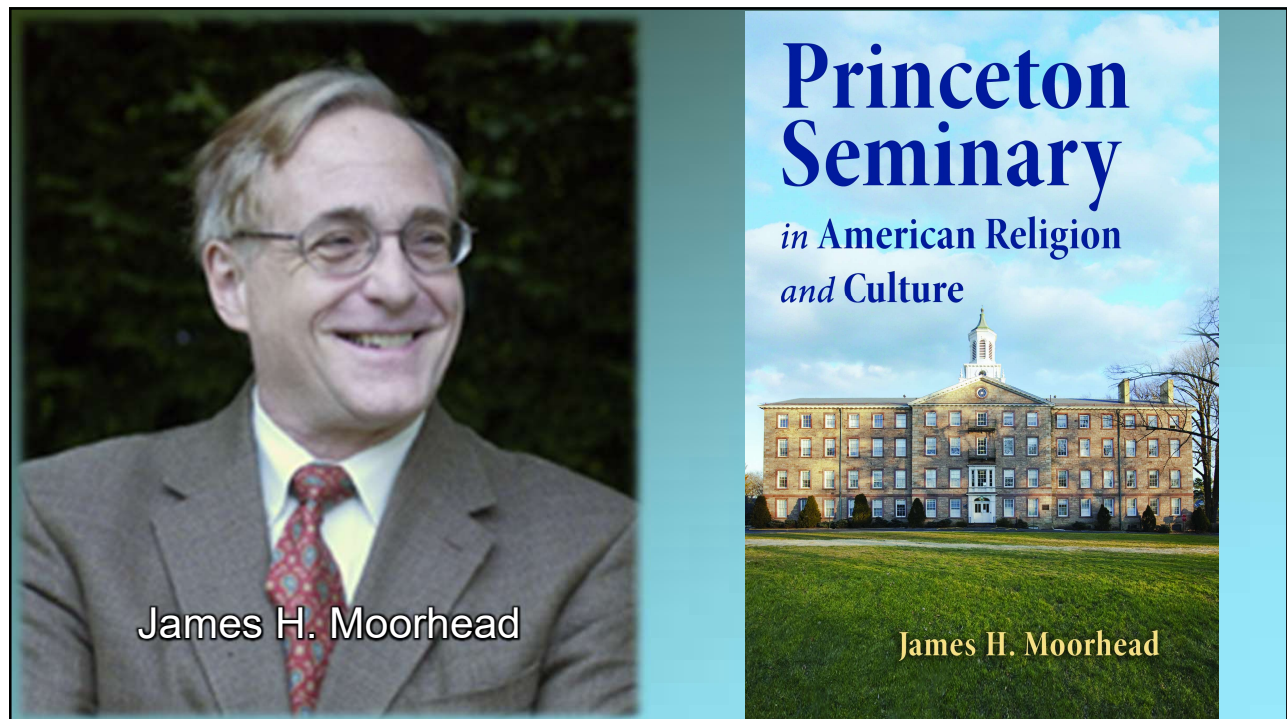








Princeton Predecessors



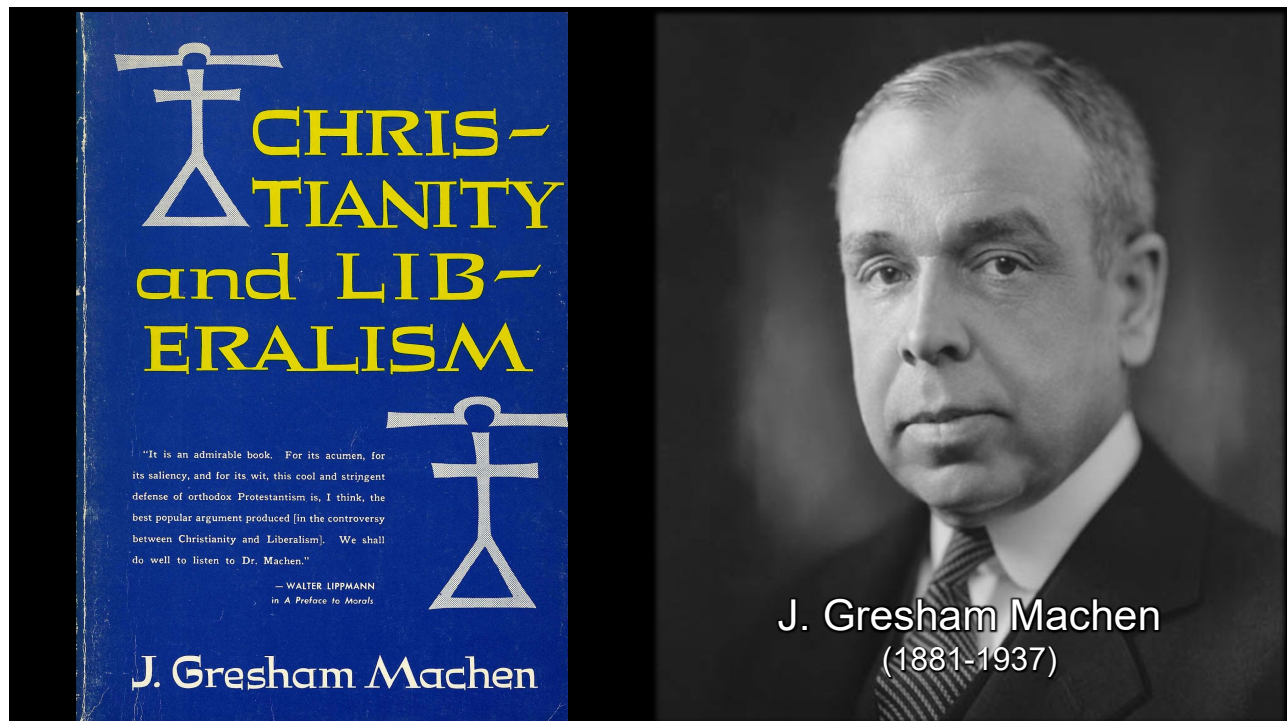
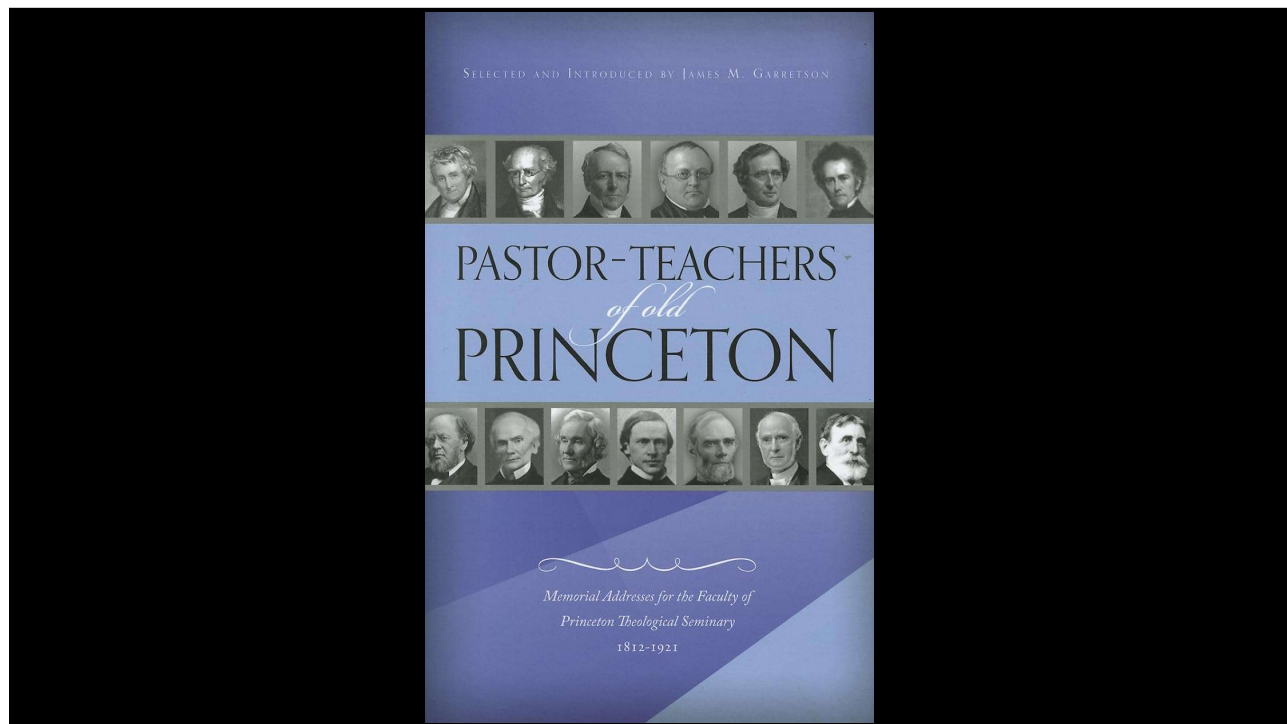
Moorhead recounts the controversy at Princeton that lead to Machen resigning his faculty position (along with others) to found a new seminary in Philadelphia—Westminster Theological Seminary.

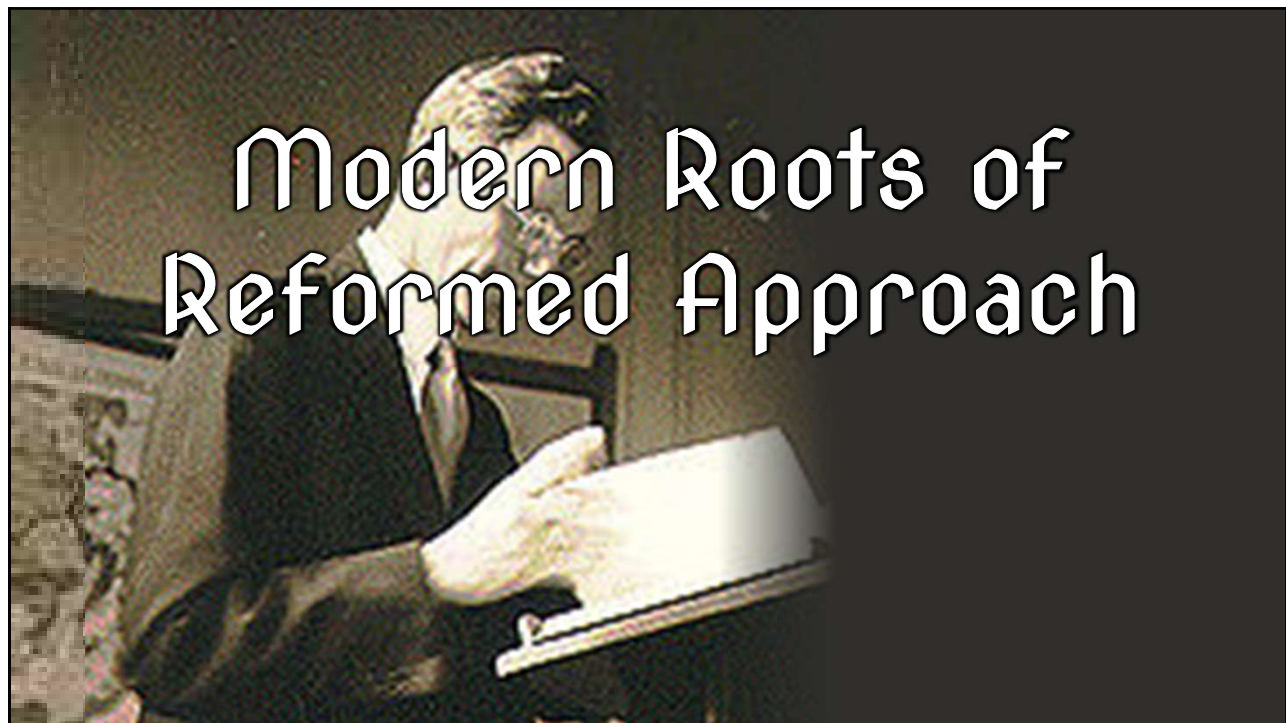


James H. Moorhead

"Although all members of the existing faculty were invited to remain, there was a major secession. J. Gresham Machen, Robert Dick Wilson, and Oswald Allis saw the change as the first step toward the destruction of Old Princeton and resigned to form the nucleus of Westminster Theological Seminary, which opened its doors in the fall of 1929 in the greater Philadelphia area. They were also joined by Cornelius Van Til, who had just been offered a position at Princeton but turned it down to go to Westminster."

[James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 368]





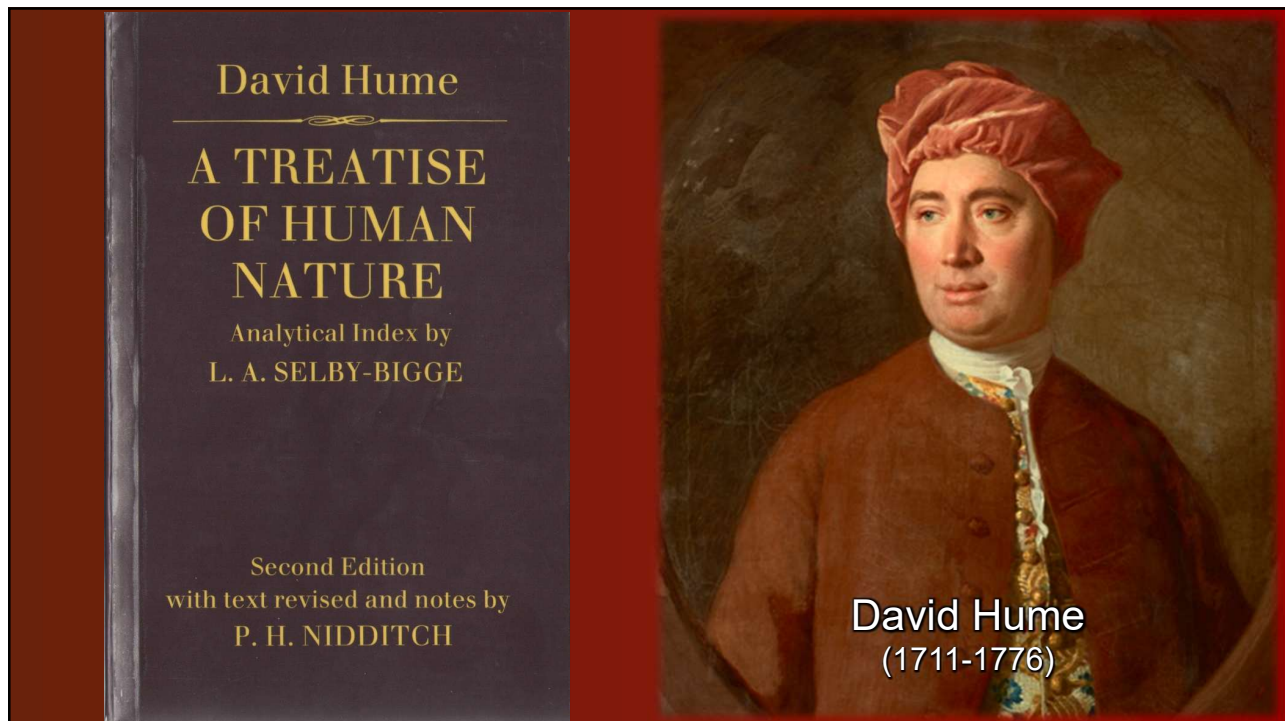
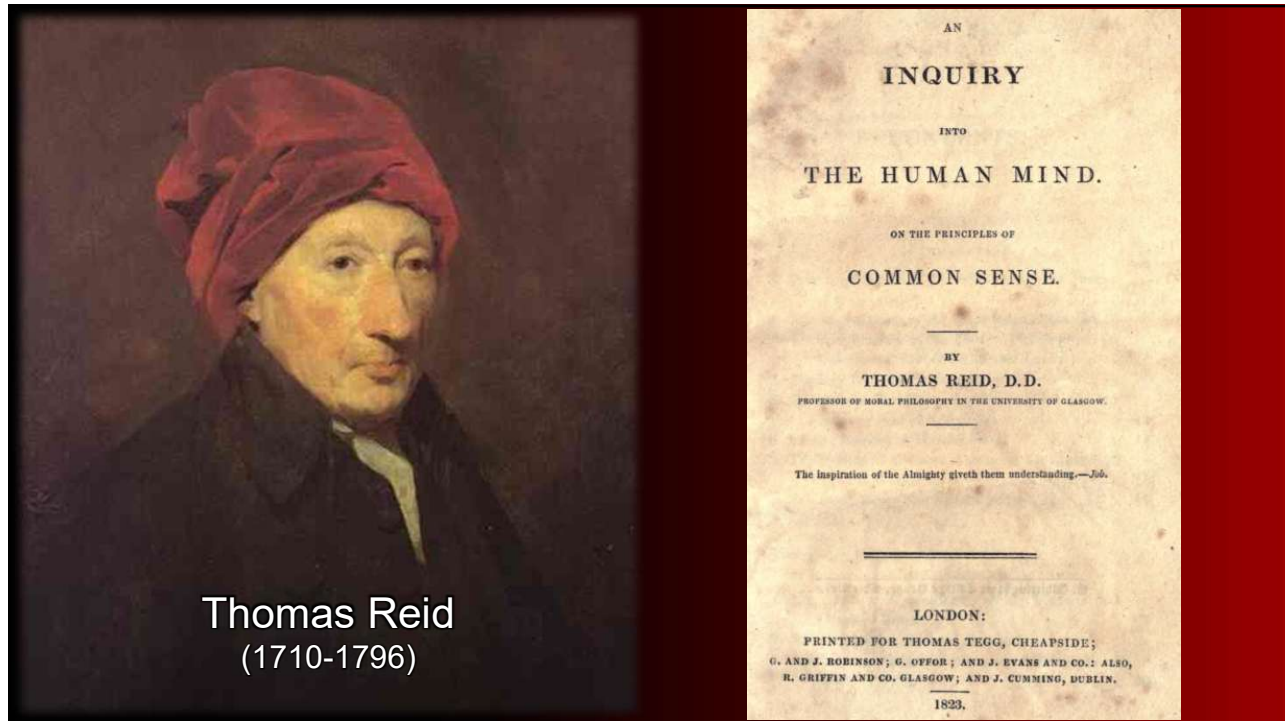
The term 'Reformed' refers to that "branch" of Protestantism whose theological development followed the contours of the thinking of John Calvin (1509-1564).

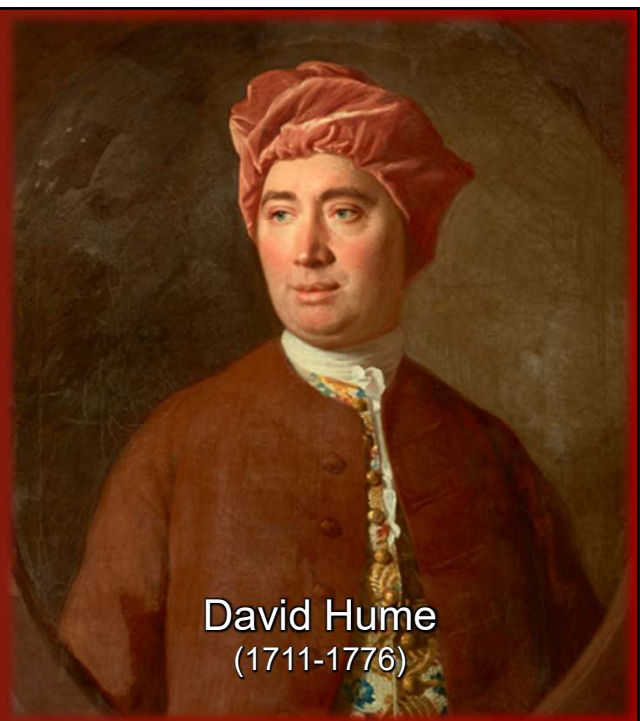
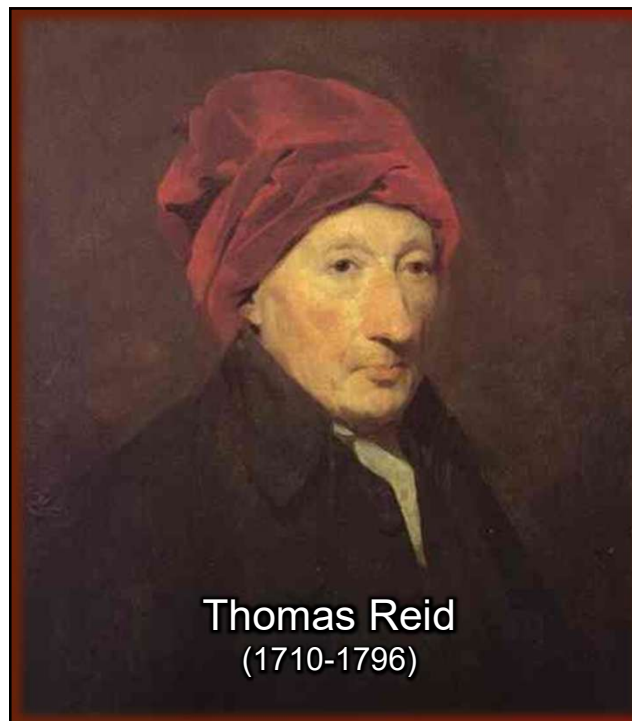
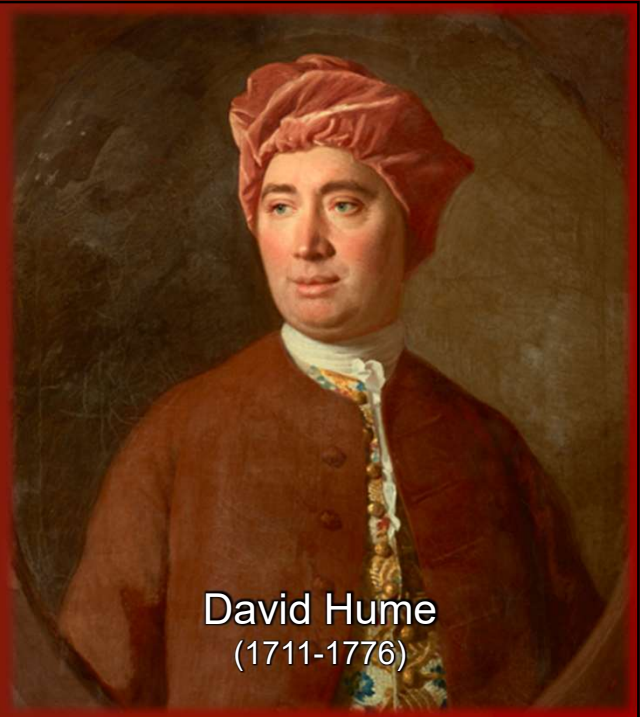
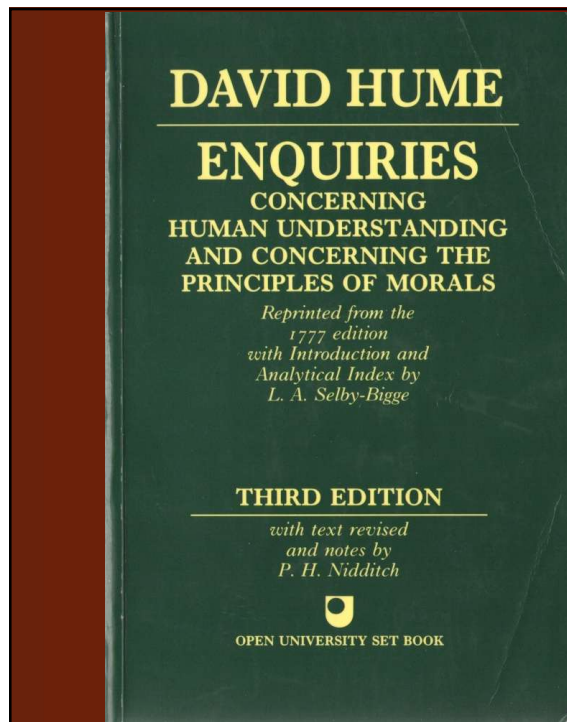
'Reformed' is sometimes used in distinction to other traditions within Protestantism whose theological development followed the contours of the thinking of Martin Luther (1483-1546).

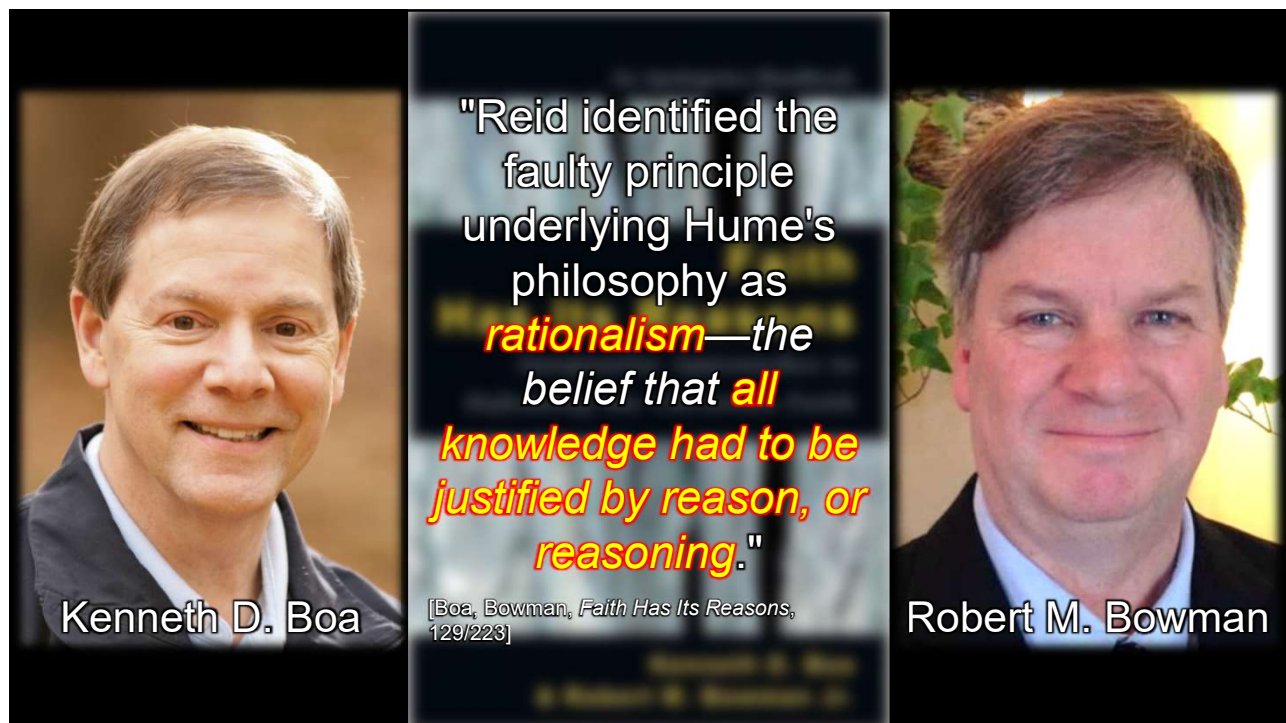
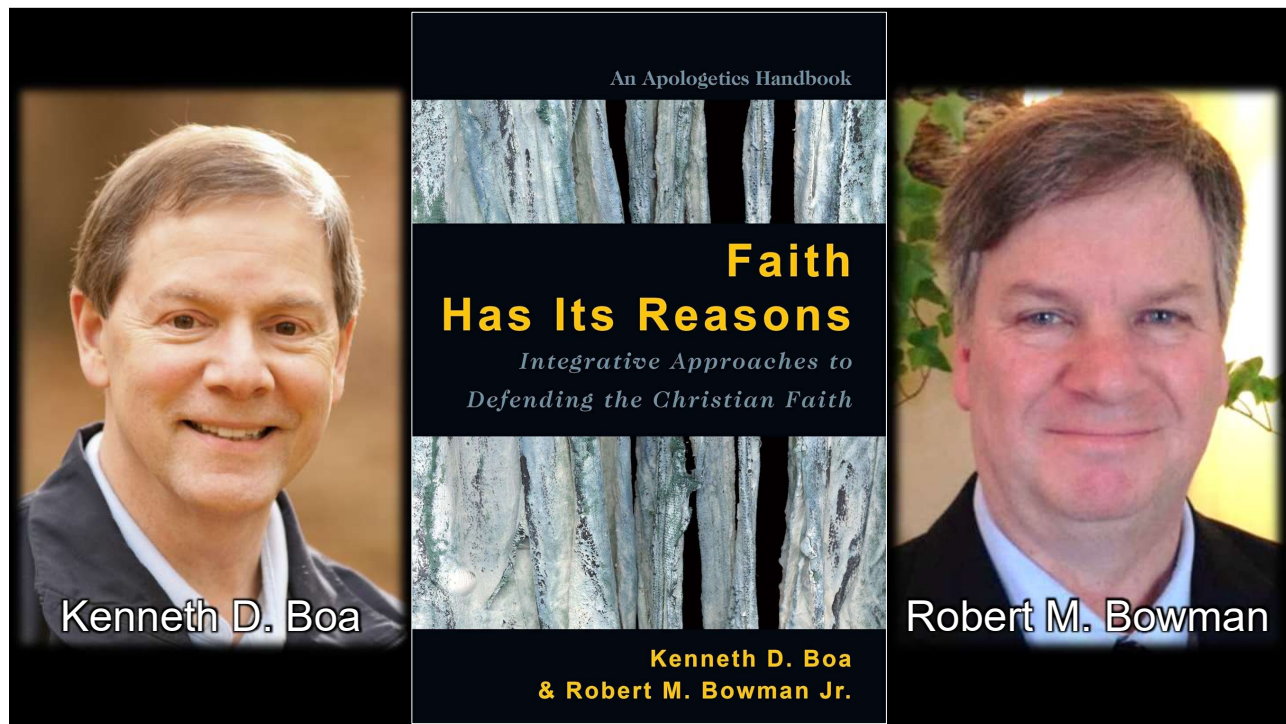
In case one has not noticed, the terms 'approaches' and 'methods' are often used as a synonym for the term 'systems' regarding Apologetic Systems.

A man in a dark suit and tie is seated, holding an open book or document. He is looking down at the text. The background is dark and slightly out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting like a library or study.

Modern Roots of
Reformed Approach







"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

At best, this definition of 'rationalism' as a principle of a philosophy can be misleading.

Used for a particular philosophical position, the label 'rationalism' refers to the view that reason (in contrast to the senses) is the primary or sole means of knowing truths about reality.

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

Rationalism regards knowledge as fundamentally *a priori*, meaning prior to or apart from sensory (empirical) experience.

No text of philosophy with which I am familiar which covers the labels of the various philosophical positions has ever defined 'rationalism' as Boa and Bowman have here.

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

What is more, with the exception of mysticism and to some extent fideism, all systems seek to be rational, coherent, and without contradiction by the careful employment of reasoning, including Reid himself.

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

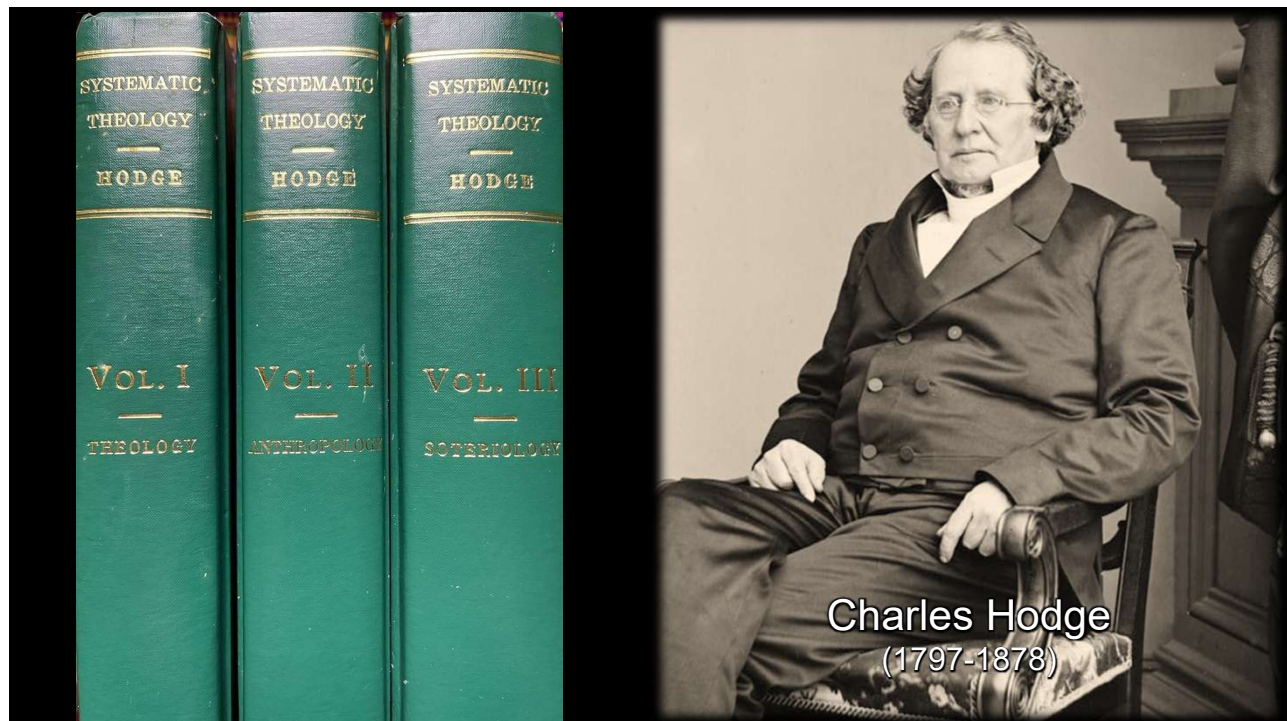
[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

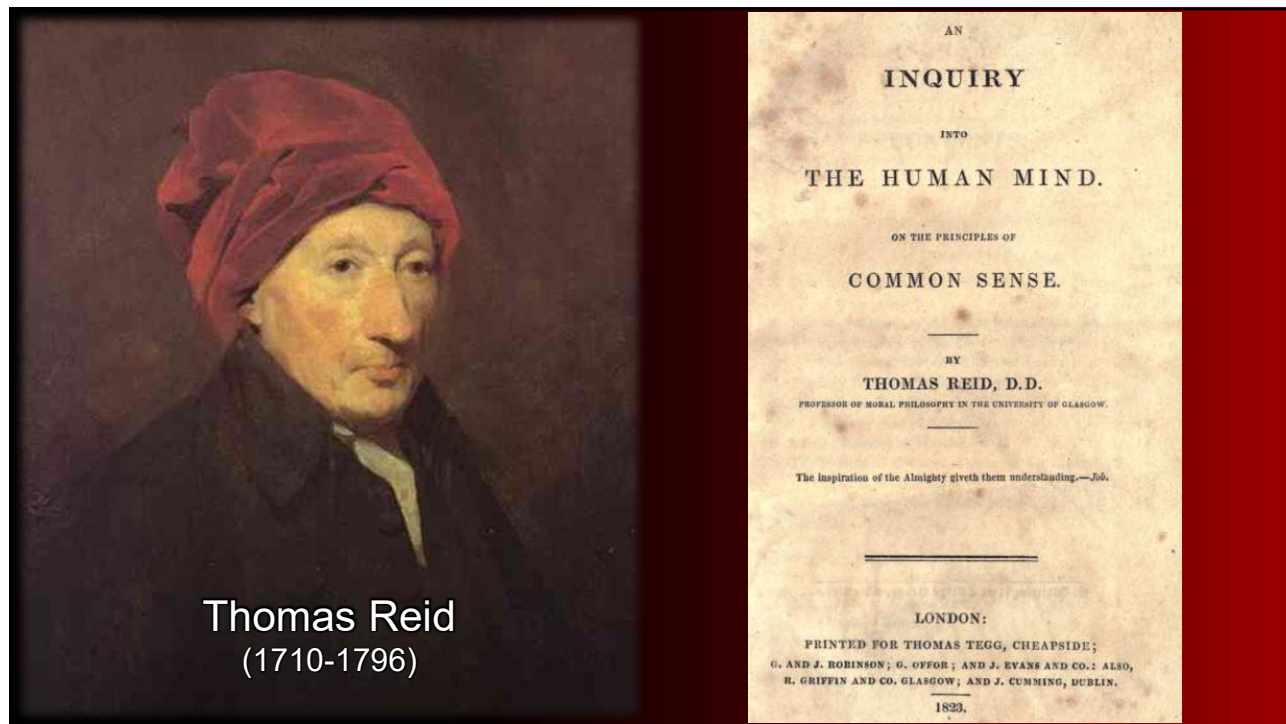
Despite all this, Boa and Bowman are spot on in bringing up Thomas Reid as the start of the modern roots of the Reformed approach (i.e., Presuppositionalism). Van Til saw his system as, among other things, a corrective to what began to happen at Princeton Seminary.

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

The conventional view is that the main Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, was influenced by Thomas Reid and his "Scottish Common Sense Realism."





**Scottish Common
Sense Realism**

*"If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them — these are what we call **the principles of common sense**; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd."*

[Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* I, § 6]

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

The conventional view is that the main Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, was influenced by Thomas Reid and his "Scottish Common Sense Realism."

Hodge's "drift" was characterized by Van Til as "less consistent Calvinism."

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]

The issue concerned "the point of contact" in doing apologetics with the unbeliever.

The main point of contention had to do with how Hodge, in the first chapter of his *Systematic Theology*, understood the role of reason in light of the effects of the Fall.

"Reid identified the faulty principle underlying Hume's philosophy as **rationalism**—the belief that **all knowledge had to be justified by reason, or reasoning.**"

[Boa, Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 129/223]


I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention a relatively recent challenge to this conventional view that Charles Hodge was, indeed, influenced by Thomas Reid's Scottish Common Sense Realism.

FOREWORD BY JOHN D. WOODBRIDGE


"Right Reason" *and the* Princeton Mind

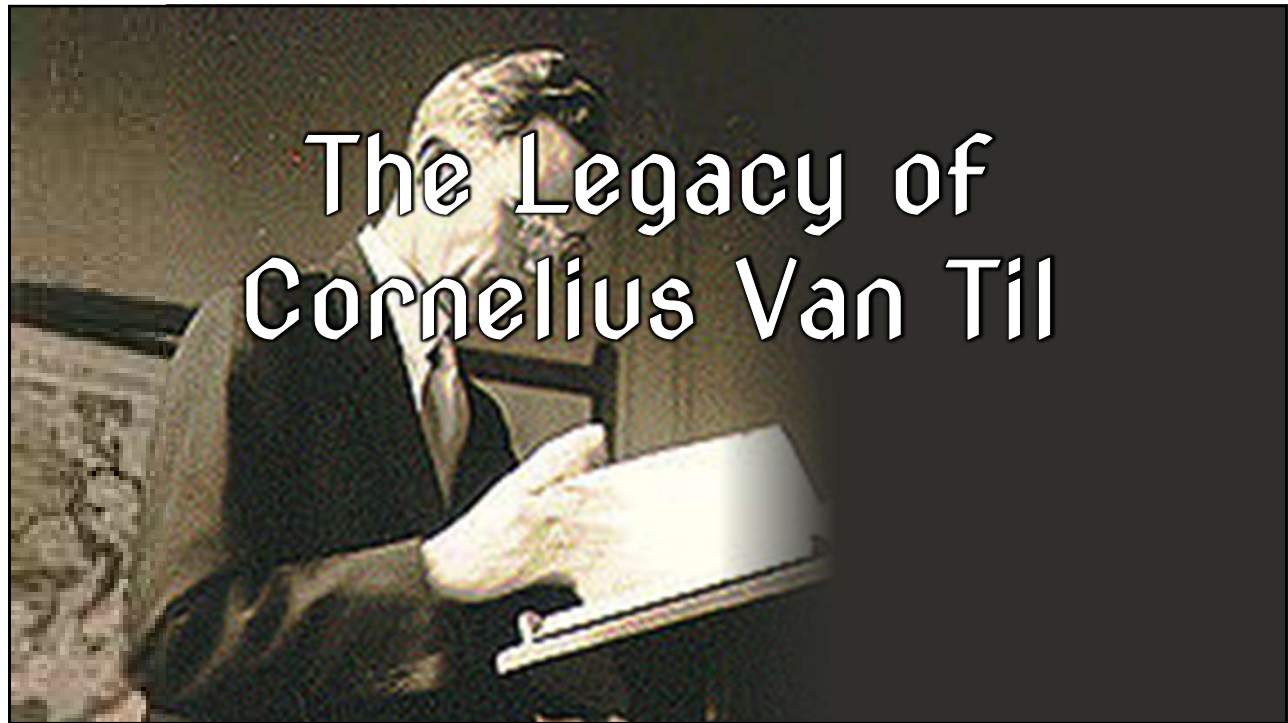
— — —

AN UNORTHODOX PROPOSAL



PAUL KJOSS HELSETH





***The legacy of Van Til
endures primarily in the
reformed camp of
American Christian
evangelicalism.***

*The legacy of Van Til endures primarily in the reformed camp of American Christian **evangelicalism**.*

One should note a particular meaning attached to the terms 'evangelical' and 'evangelicalism' in Van Til's writings.

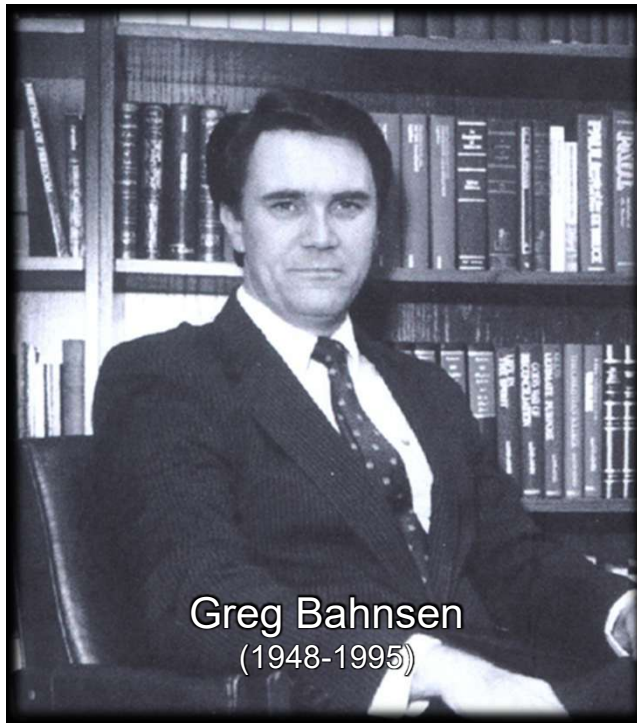
*The legacy of Van Til endures primarily in the reformed camp of American Christian **evangelicalism**.*

In its contemporary American usage, an evangelical is a conservative, Protestant Christian holding to the doctrine of Biblical authority, if not also inerrancy, together with affirming the primacy of evangelism.

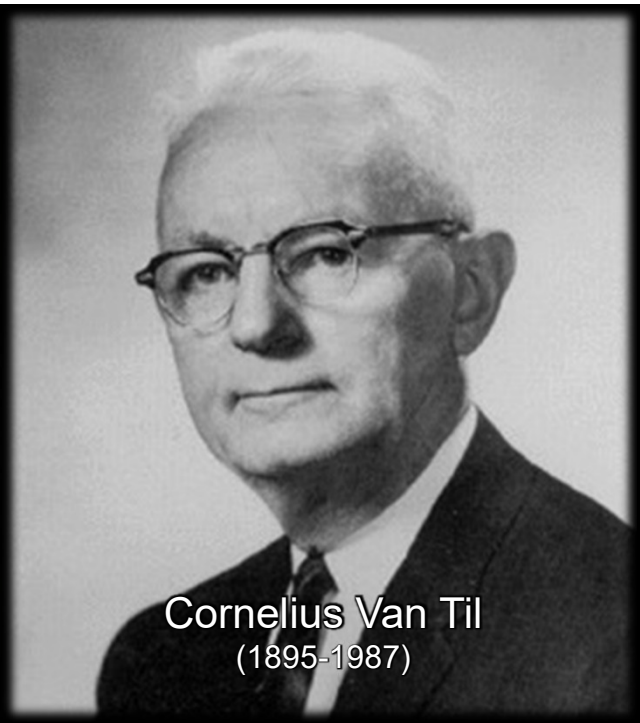
The legacy of Van Til endures primarily in the reformed camp of American Christian evangelicalism.

Van Til uses the term to refer to those otherwise conservative Protestants who have decidedly moved away from Calvinism (as Van Til understands it) together with what that Calvinism entails regarding the underlying principles of one's apologetic method.

The legacy of Van Til endures primarily in the reformed camp of American Christian evangelicalism.



Greg Bahnsen
(1948-1995)



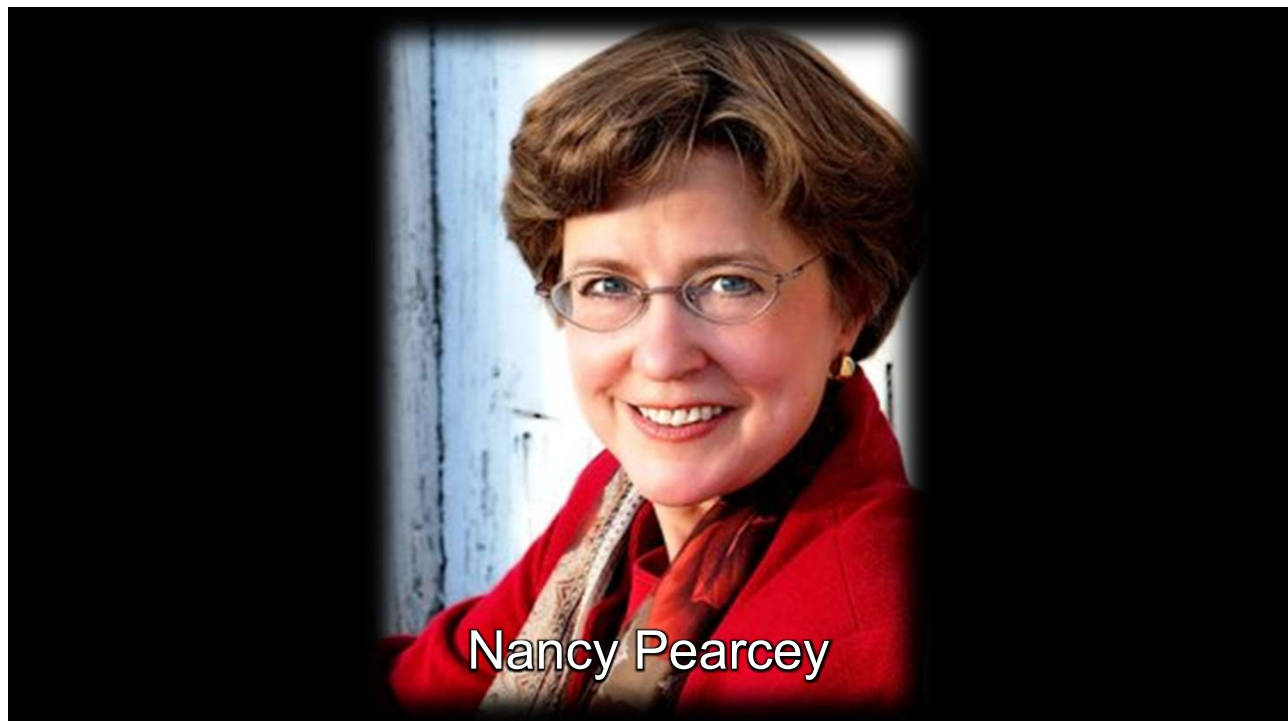
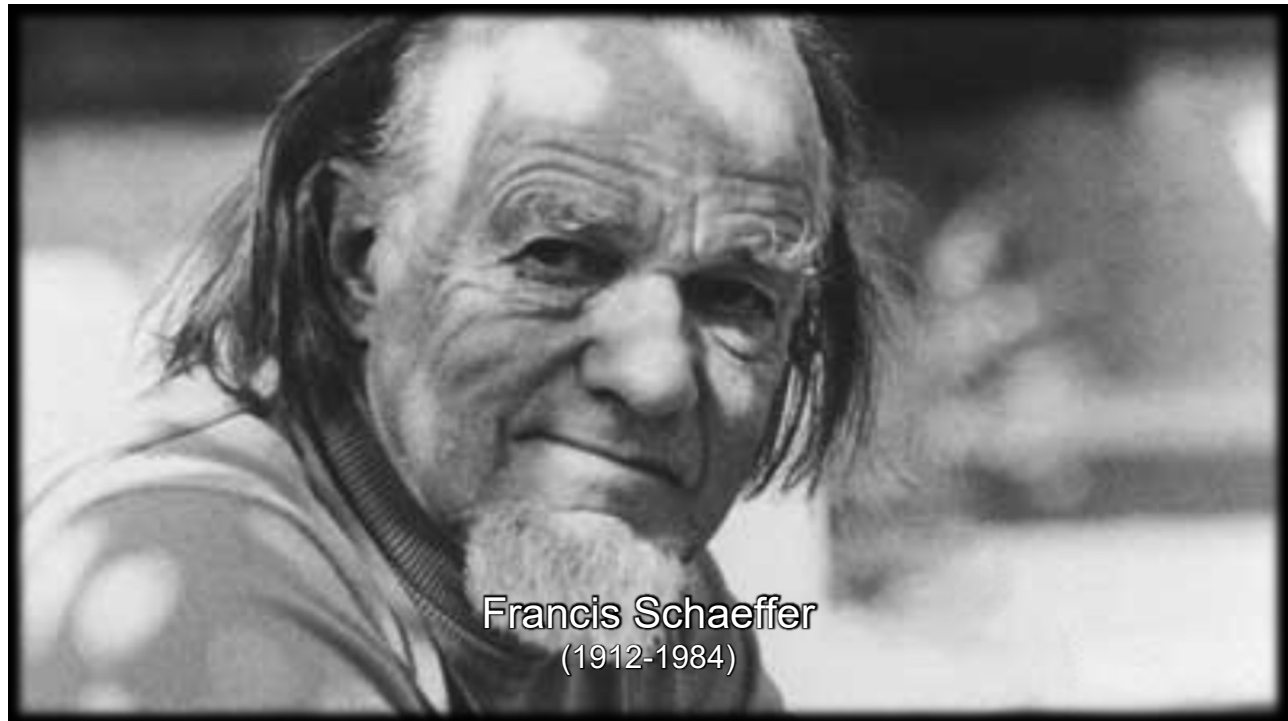
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



John Frame



K. Scott Oliphint





James White

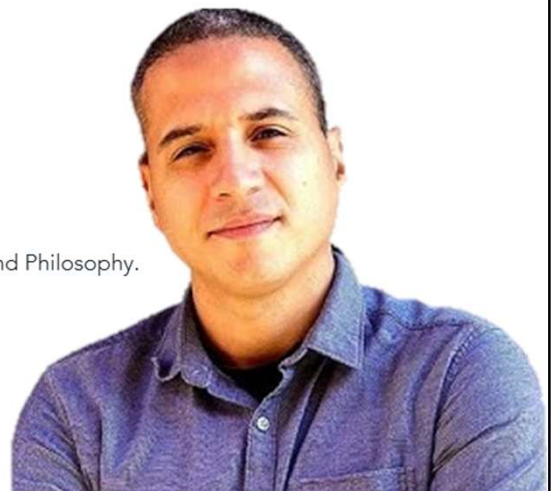
Jeffrey Johnson



Revealed Apologetics

Eli Ayala

An apologetics podcast that covers issues of apologetics, theology and Philosophy.

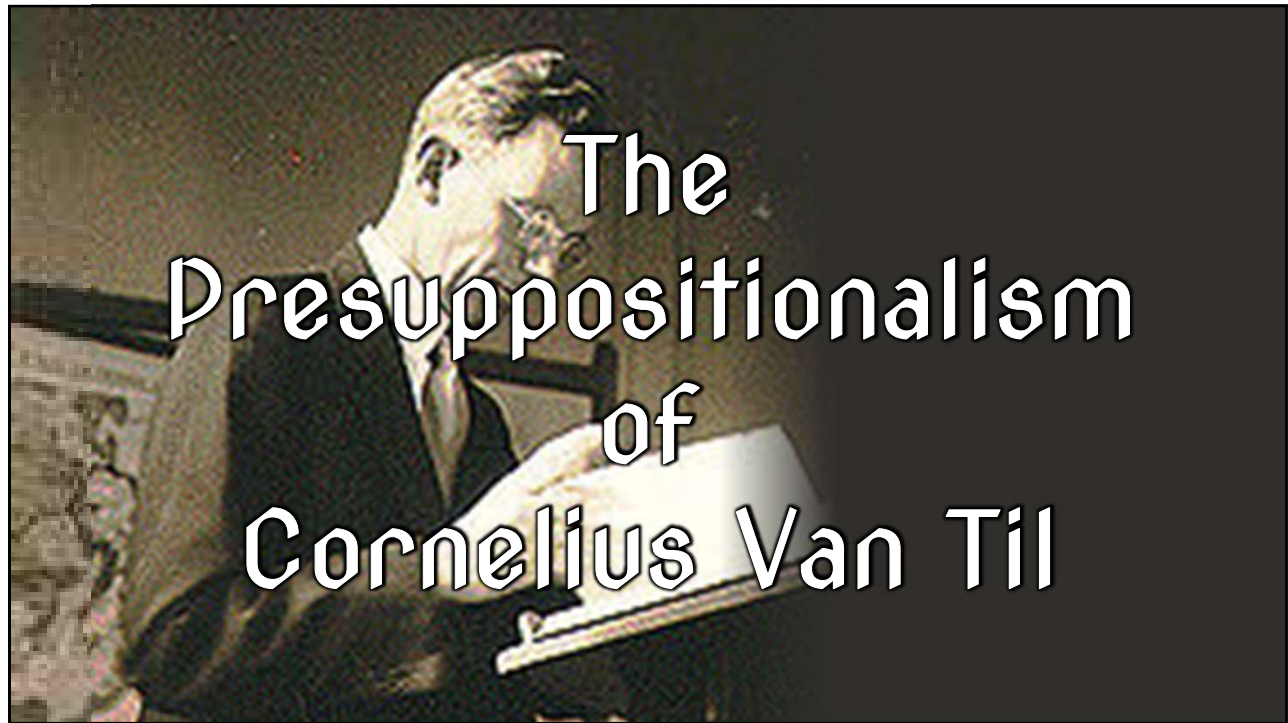


*Though the label
'Presuppositionalism' most often
brings to mind the thinking of
Cornelius Van Til, there is also
another version of
Presuppositionalism in the thinking
of Gordon Clark.*



Gordon H. Clark
(1902-1985)

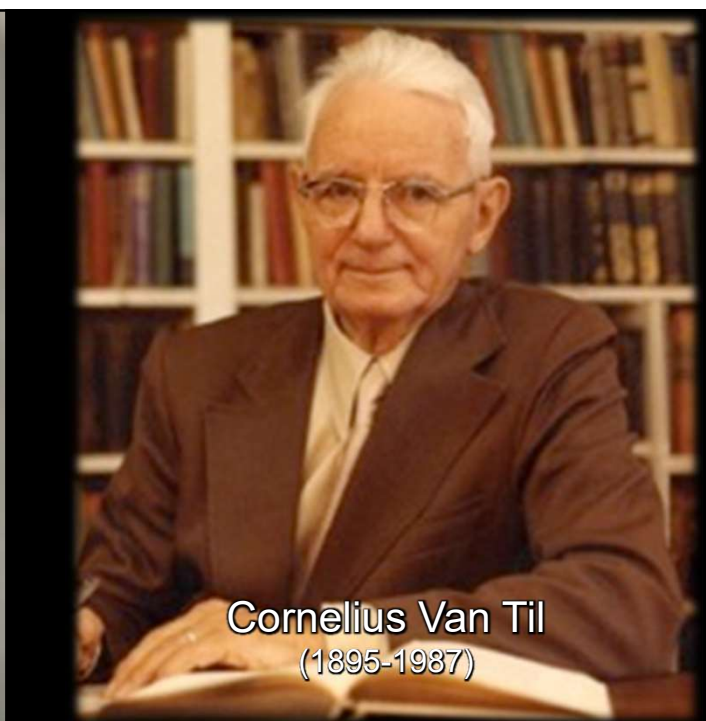
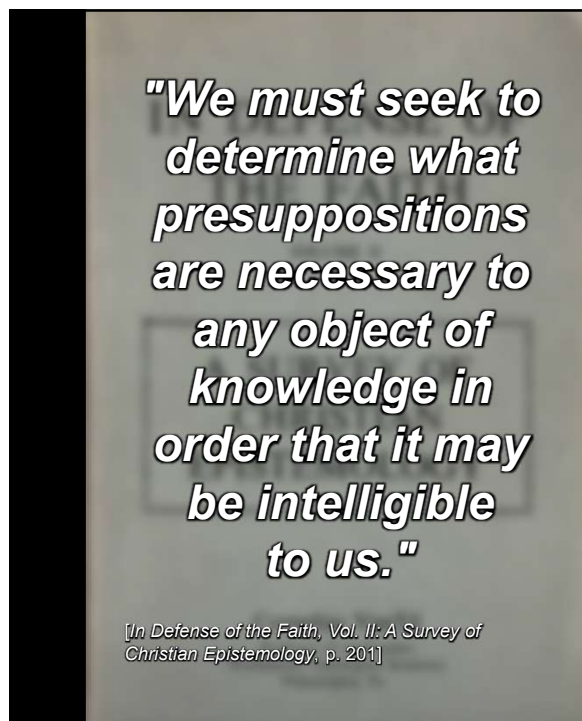
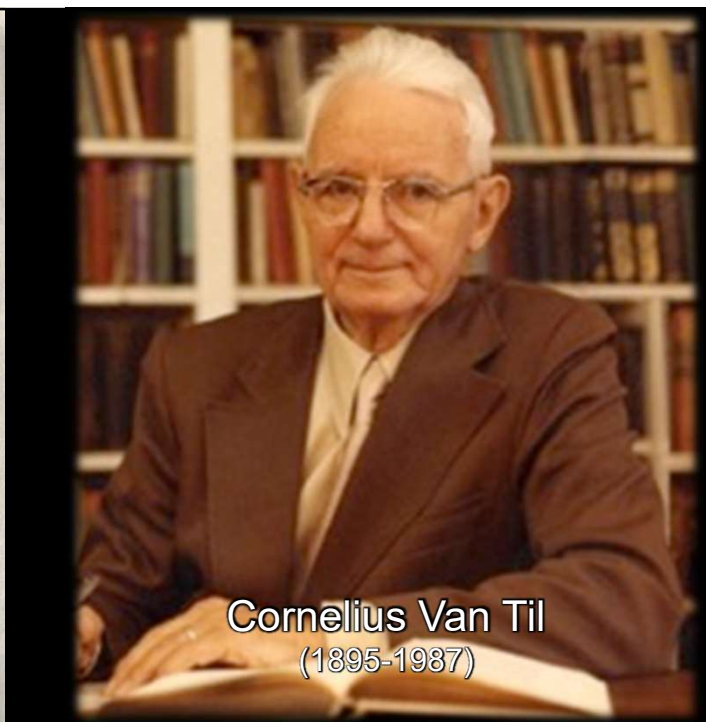
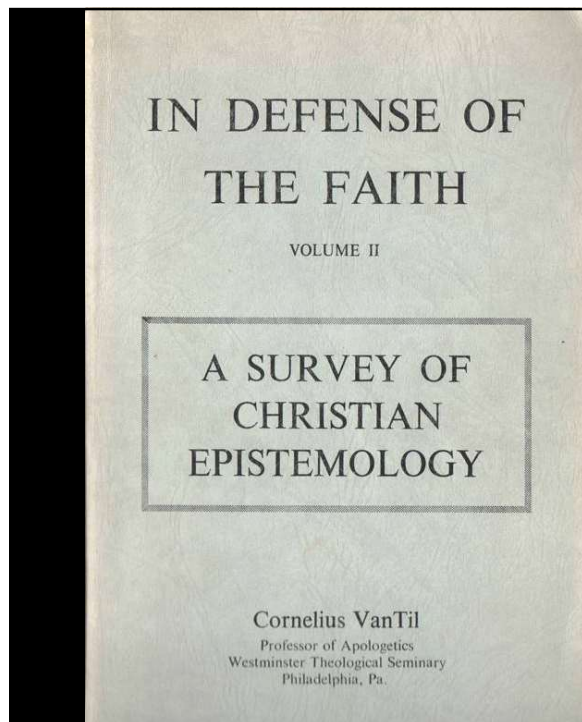
Carl F. H. Henry
(1913-2003)



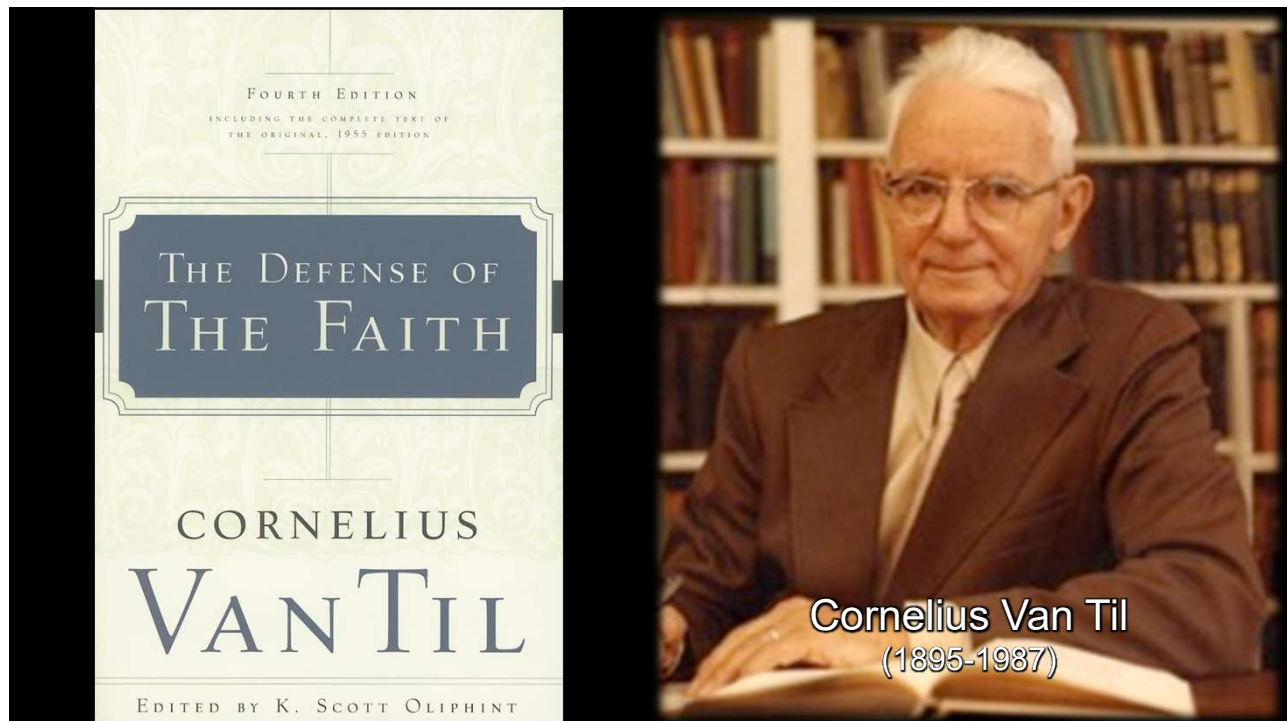
*The 'presupposition' in the name
Presuppositionalism does not mean
that the method merely identifies
and analyzes presuppositions.*

*This would not distinguish
Presuppositionalism from
Classical Apologetics.*

*Instead, Van Til sought to point out
the presuppositions that make
intelligibility possible.*



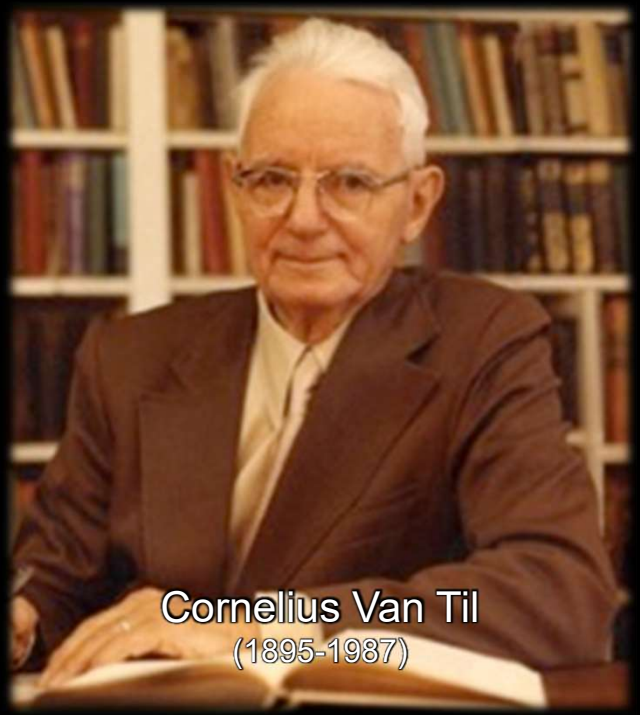
In Van Til's estimation, the methodology of Presuppositionalism was necessitated by Reformed theology, particularly the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the total depravity of the human race.



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1937)

"A Reformed method of apologetics ... implies a refusal to grant that any area or aspect of reality, any fact or any law of nature or of history can be correctly interpreted except it be seen in the light of the main doctrines of Christianity."

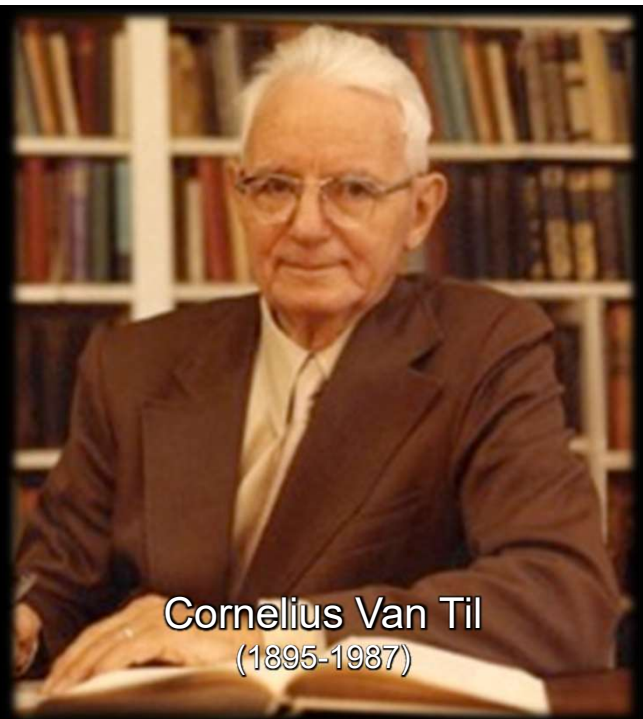
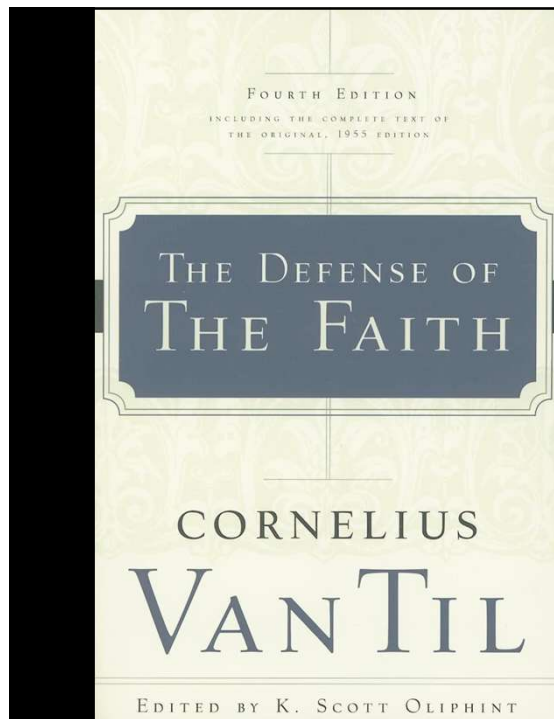
[Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 118]



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

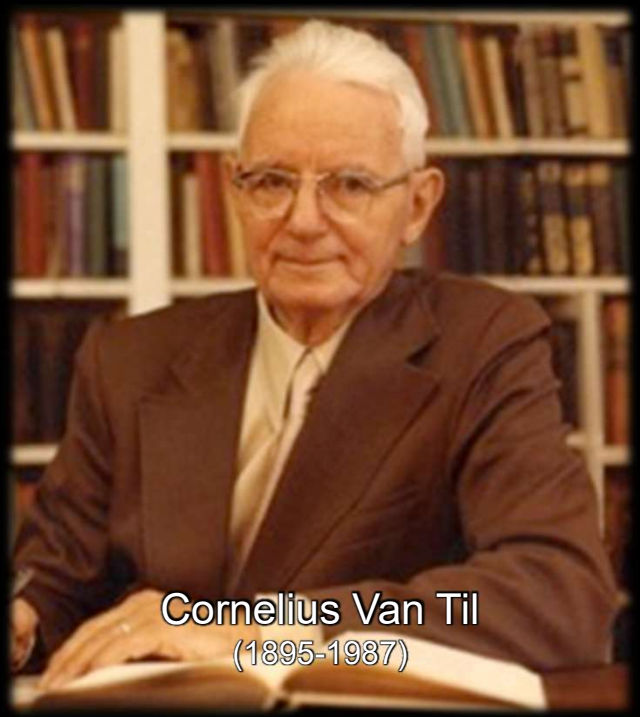
Van Til denied that there was a common ground between the believer and unbeliever on which a neutral argument for the truth of Christianity could be built.

He argued that to assume an intellectual common ground between the believer and unbeliever from which the believer could launch into a rational argument for God's existence, is de facto to deny the God of Christianity.



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

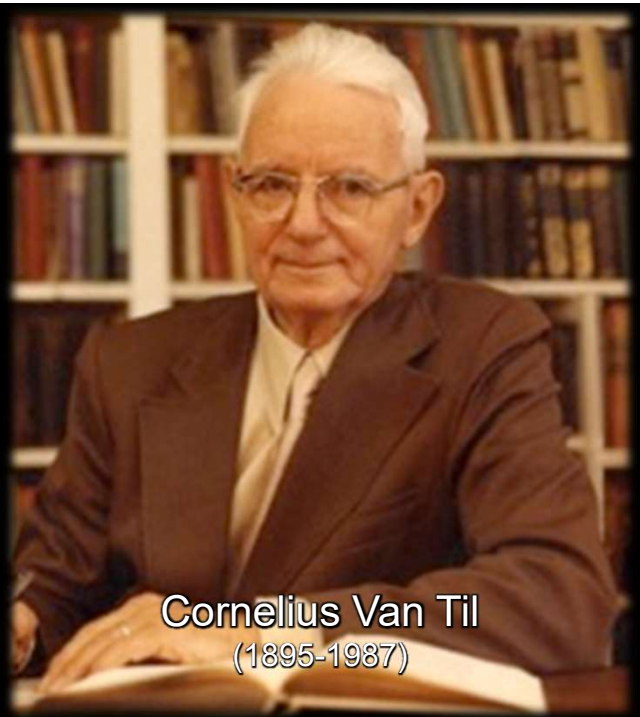
"In not challenging this basic presupposition with respect to himself as the final reference point in predication, the natural man may accept the 'theistic proofs' as fully valid. He may construct such proofs. He has constructed such proofs."



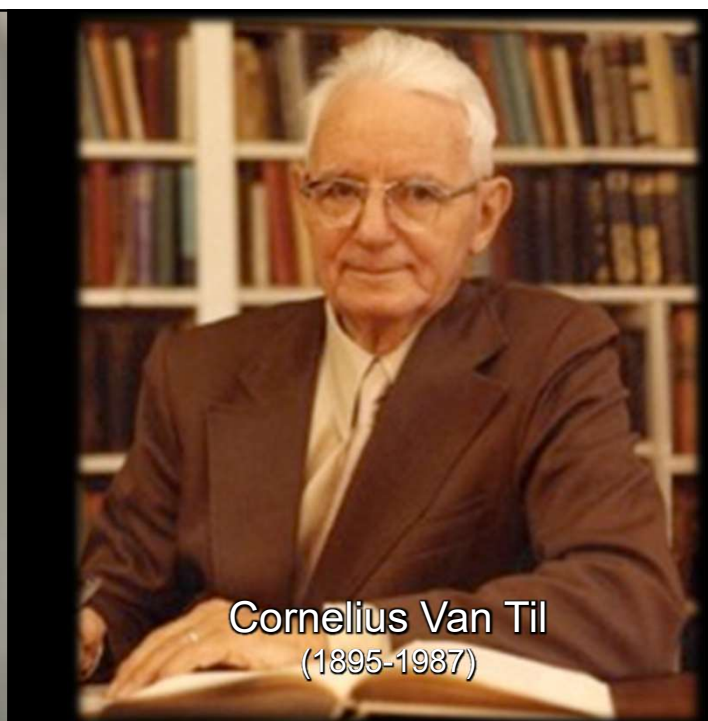
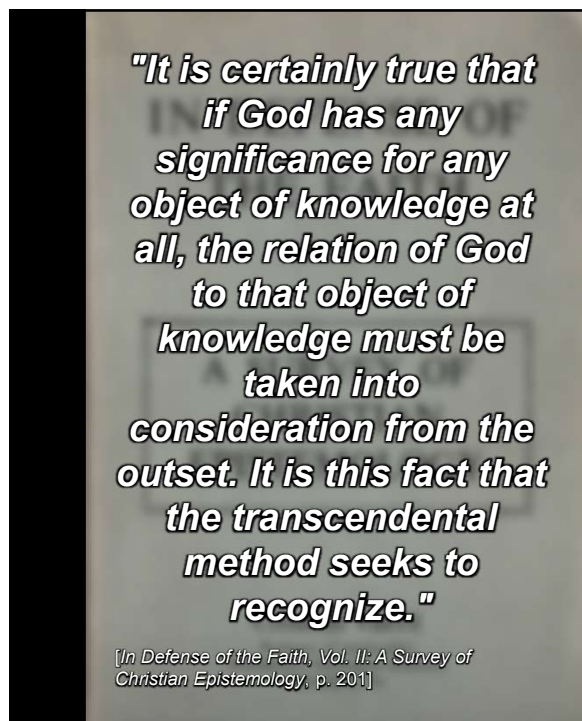
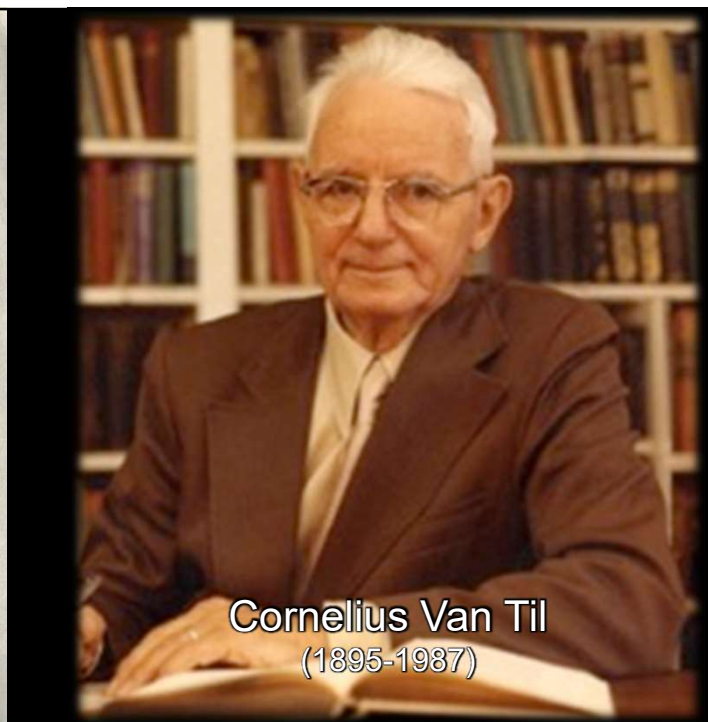
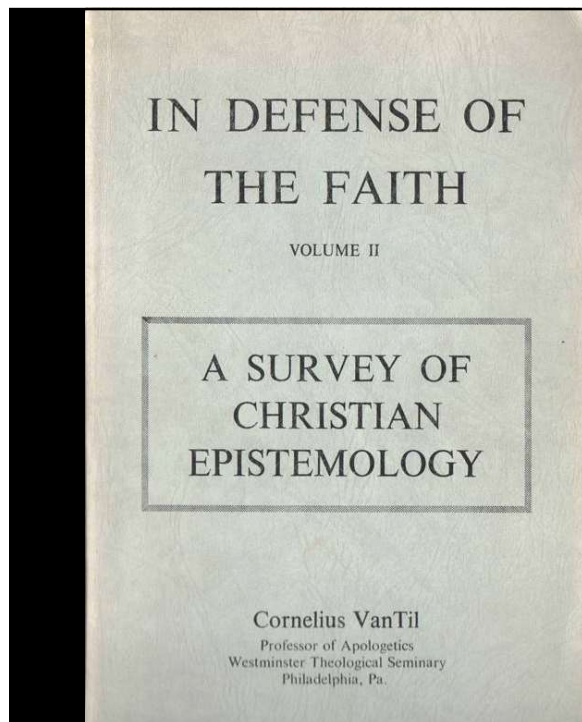
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"But the god whose existence he proves to himself in this way is always a god who is something other than the self-contained ontological Trinity of Scripture."

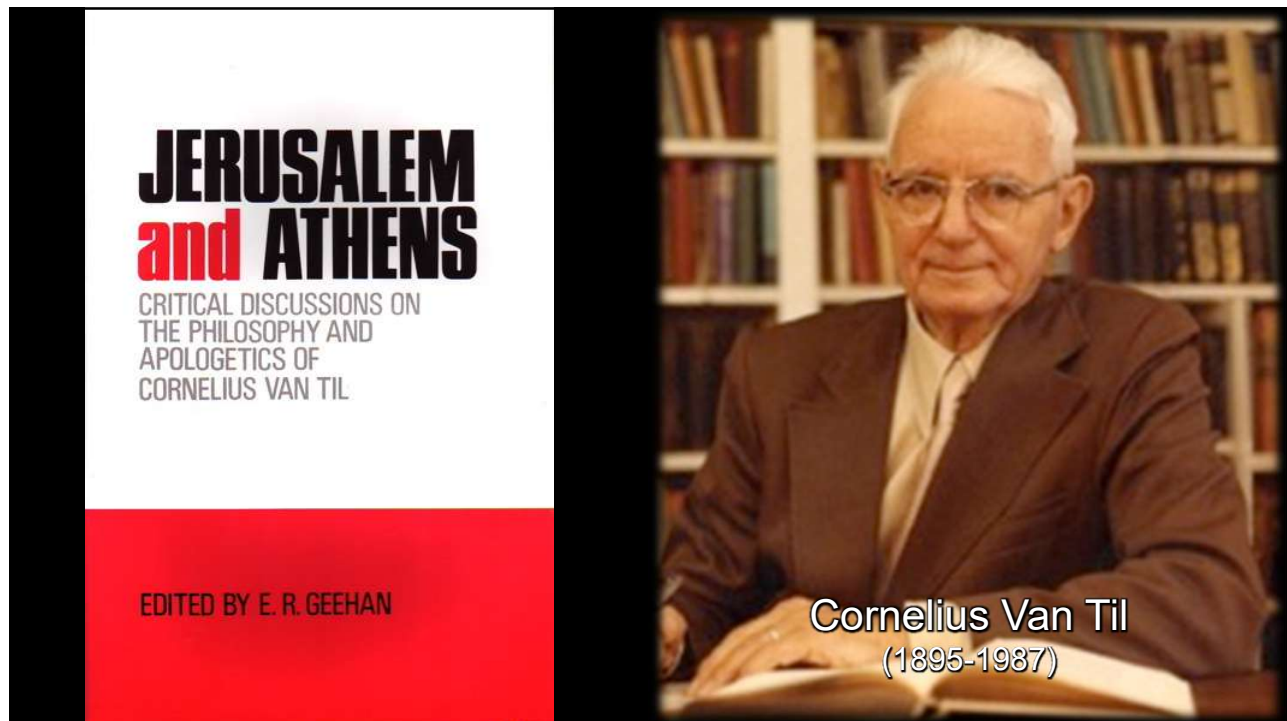
[Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 101]



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



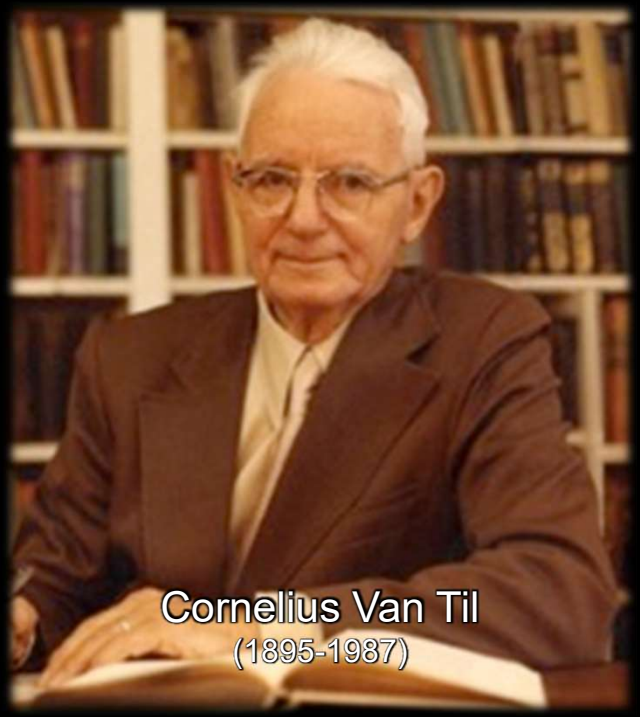
Van Til insisted that one must presuppose the Triune God and the Christian Scriptures together with the "Creator-creature" distinction before any sense can be made of anything else.



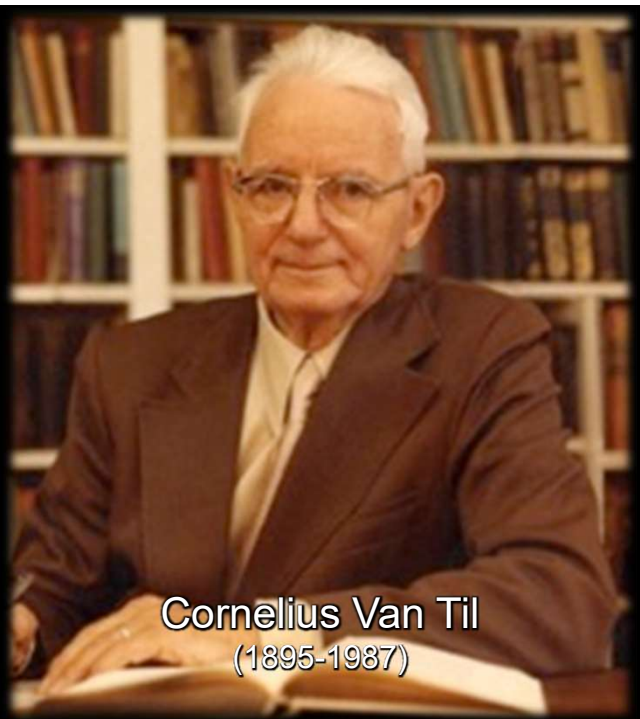
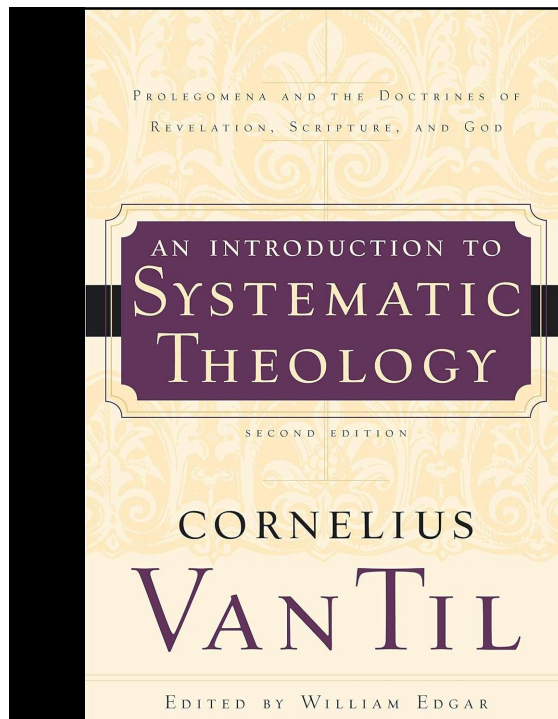
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"If we allow that one intelligent word can be spoken about being or knowing or acting as such, without first introducing the Creator-creature distinction, we are sunk. As Christians we must not allow that even such a thing as enumeration or counting can be accounted for except upon the presupposition of the truth of what we are told in Scripture about the triune God as the Creator and Redeemer of the World."

["Response by C. Van Til [to Herman Doyeweerd] Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought' in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 91]



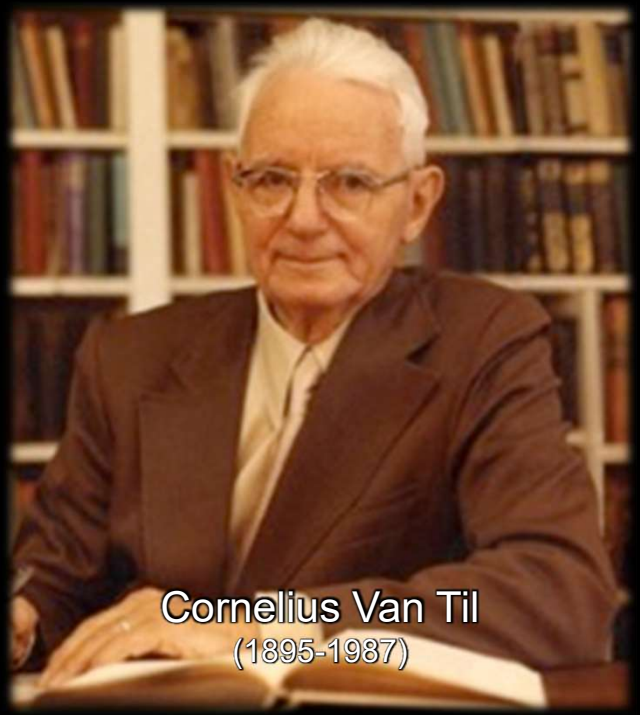
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1937)



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1937)

"Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence with the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition."

[In *Defense of the Faith*, Vol. V: *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, n.c., 1974), 23, republished William Edgar, ed. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrine of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 59]

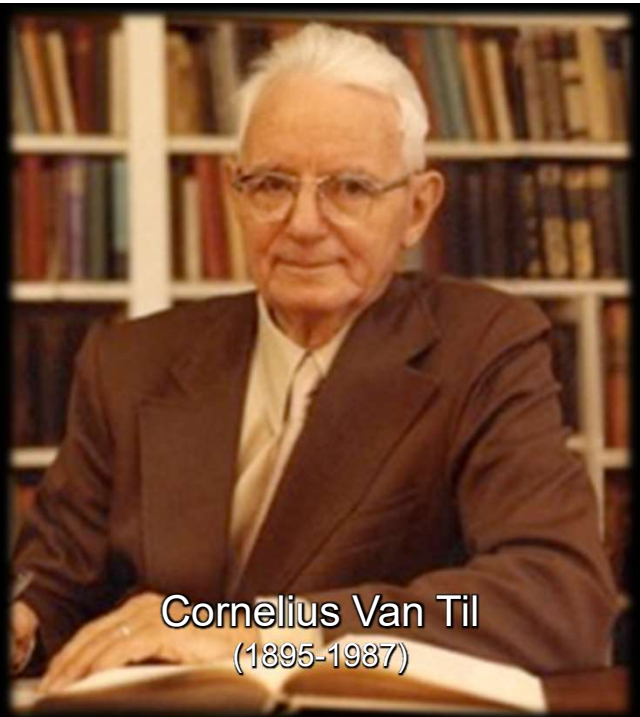


Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

JERUSALEM and ATHENS

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS ON
THE PHILOSOPHY AND
APOLOGETICS OF
CORNELIUS VAN TIL

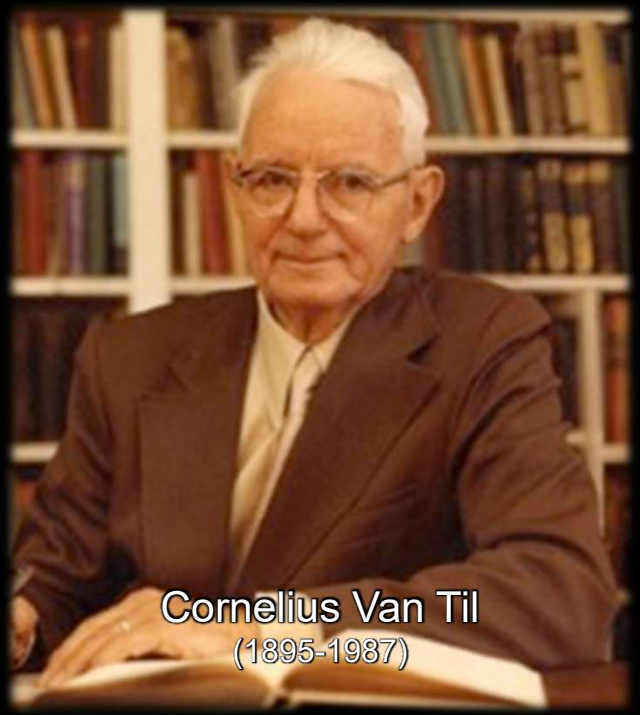
EDITED BY E. R. GEEHAN



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"As Christians we must not allow that even such a thing as enumeration or counting can be **accounted for** except upon the presupposition of truth of what we are told in Scripture about the triune God as the Creator and Redeemer of the world."

["Response by Cornelius Van Til to Herman Dooyeweerd, 'Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought'" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 91, emphasis in original]



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

Another way to say this is that the presupposition of the Triune God and the Christian Scriptures are the necessary pre-conditions of knowledge or, to use Greg Bahnsen's words, the necessary pre-conditions of intelligibility.

"This is, in the last analysis, the question as to what are one's ultimate presuppositions. When man became a sinner he made of himself instead of God the ultimate or final reference point."



"And it is precisely this presupposition, as it controls without exception all forms of non-Christian philosophy, that must be brought into question. ..."



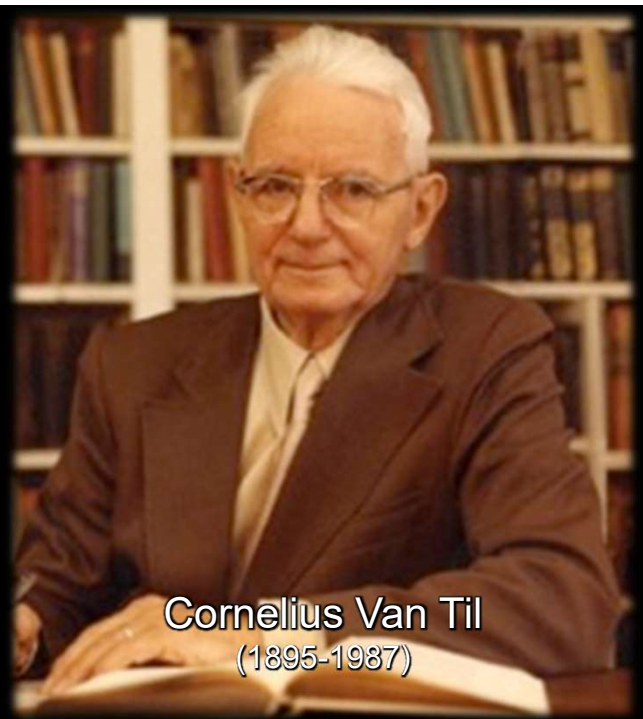
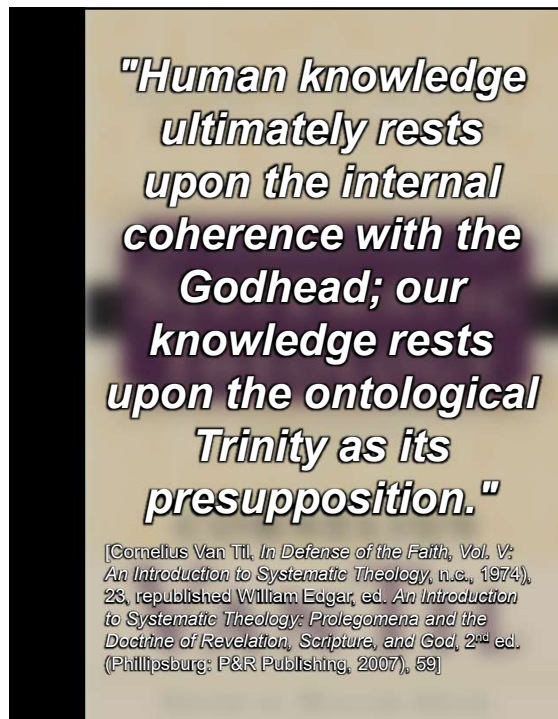
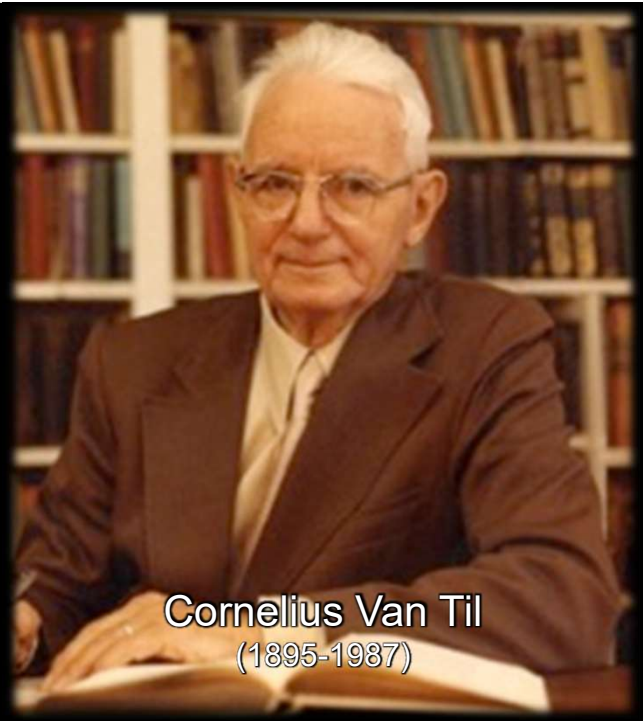
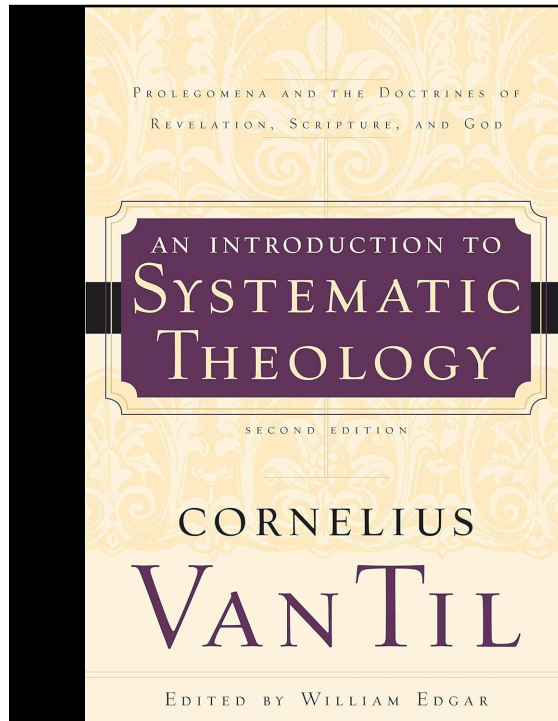
"In not challenging this basic presupposition with respect to himself as the final reference point in predication the natural man may accept the 'theistic proofs' as fully valid."



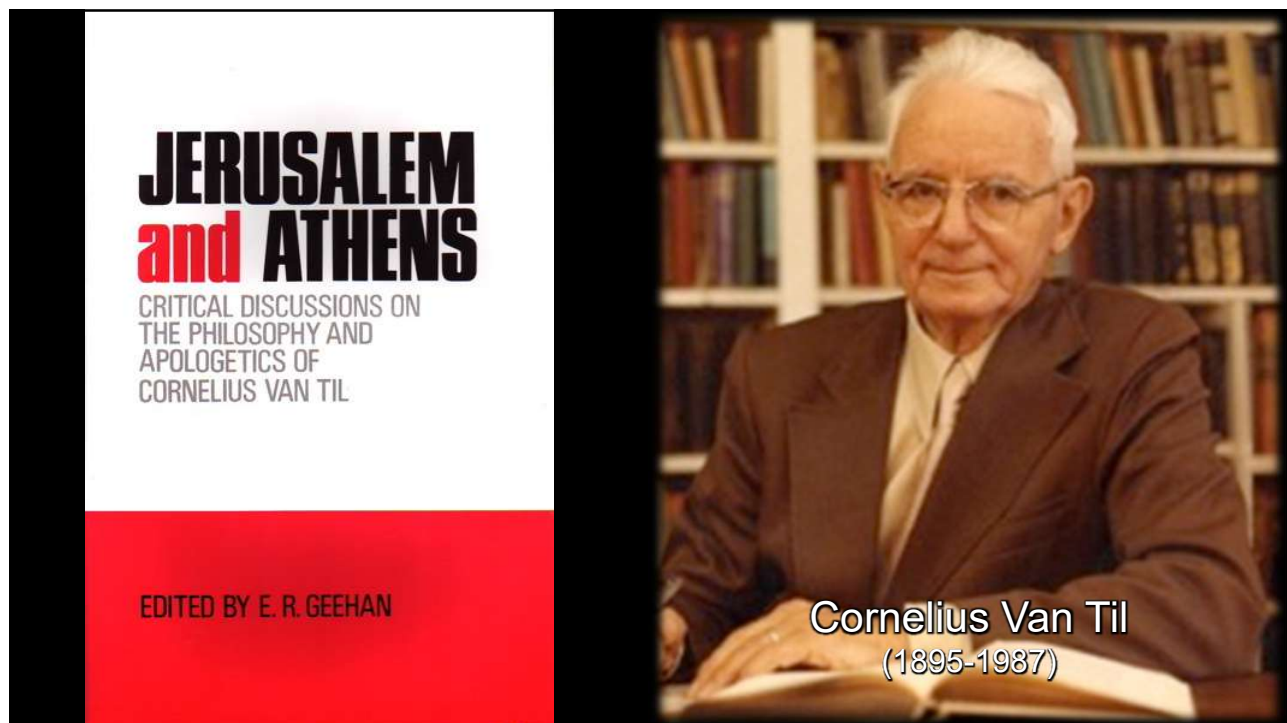
"He may construct such proofs. He has constructed such proofs. But the god whose existence he proves to himself in this way is always a god who is something other than the self-contained ontological trinity of Scripture."

[The Defense of the Faith (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1979), 77]



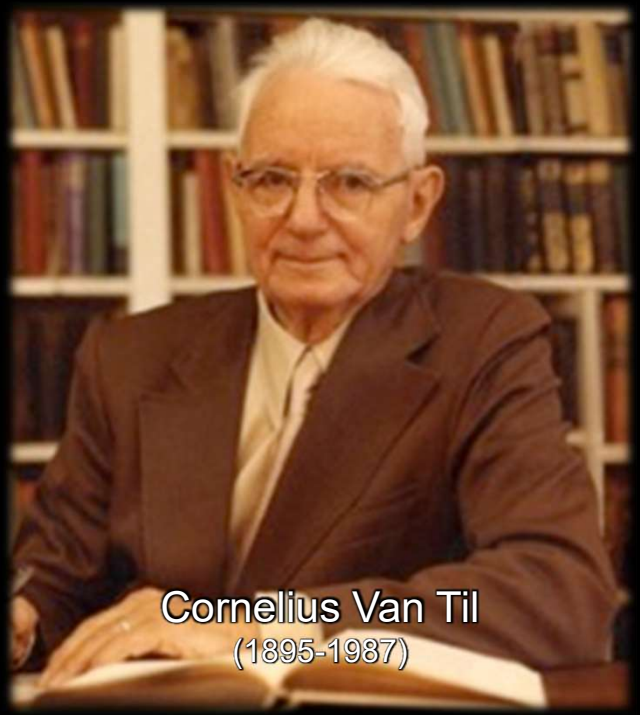


***Sometimes the Presuppositionalist
will refer to his method as a
transcendental argument because
the presupposition of the Triune God
and the Christian Scriptures are
"transcendentally necessary" for
knowledge.***



"The only 'proof' of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of 'proving' anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of 'proof' itself."

["My Credo" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 21]

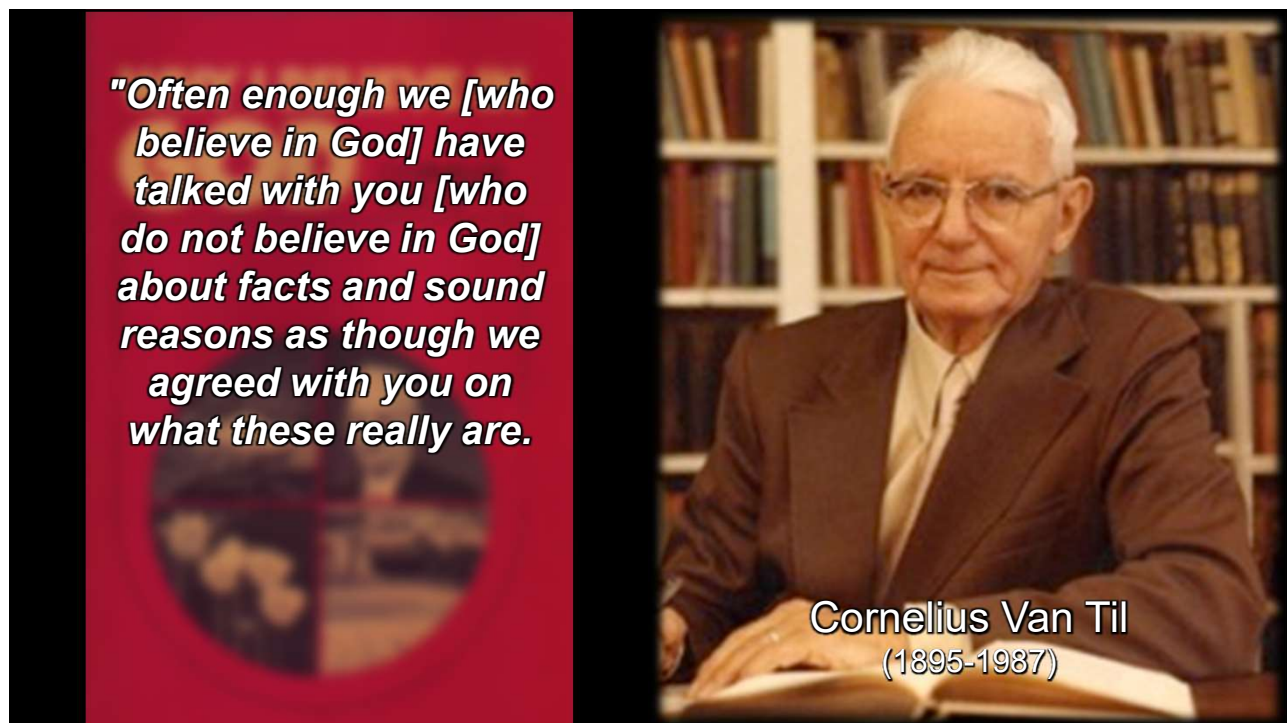
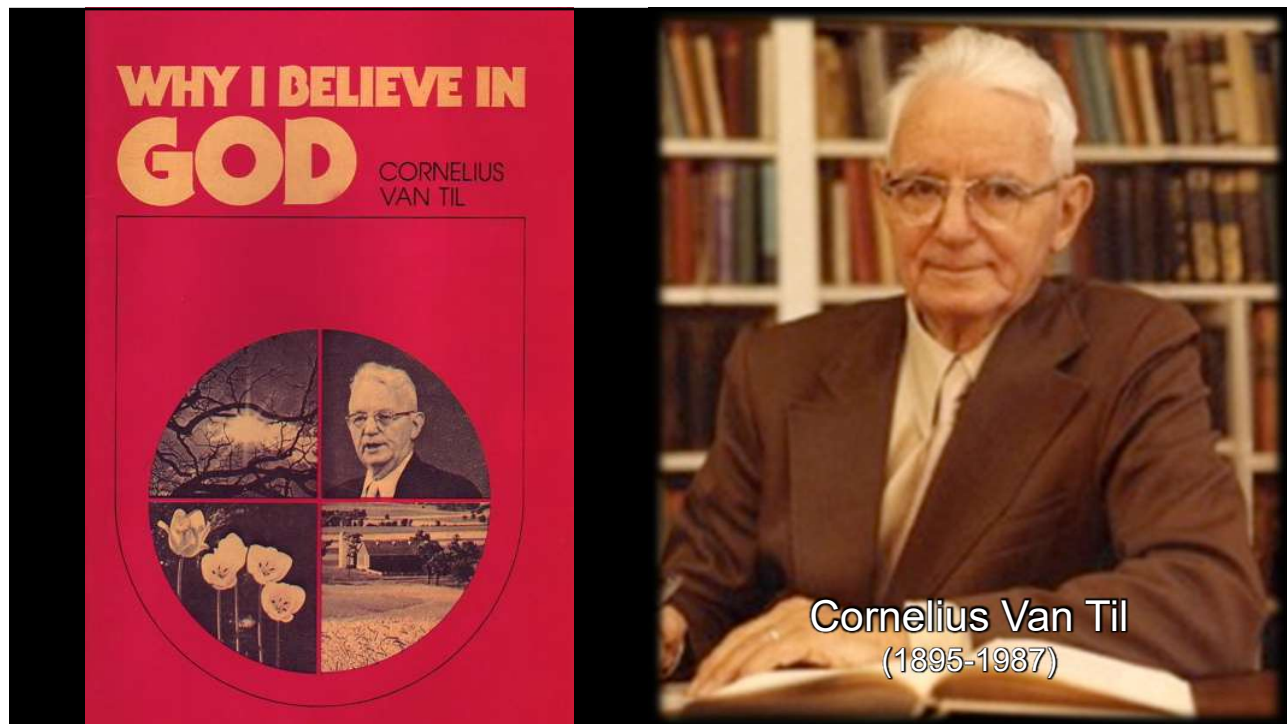


Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

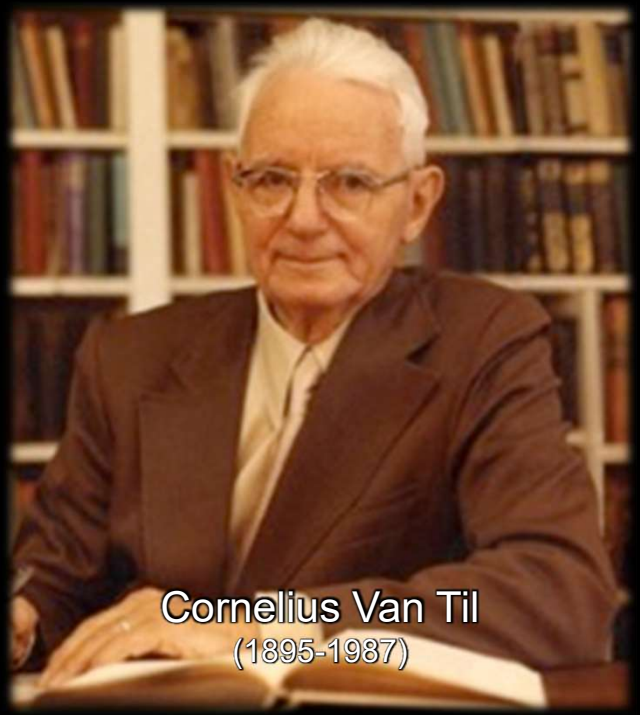
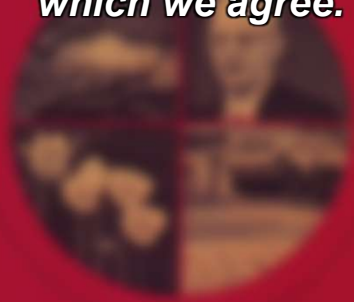
For Y to be transcendentally necessary for X means (in this context) that in order to know X, you have to posit, or assume, or presuppose Y.

To illustrate the notion of something being transcendentally necessary, the Classical apologist would affirm that logic is transcendentally necessary for there to be any knowledge at all.

Van Til argues that the presupposition of God is transcendentally necessary to know any fact of reality truly.



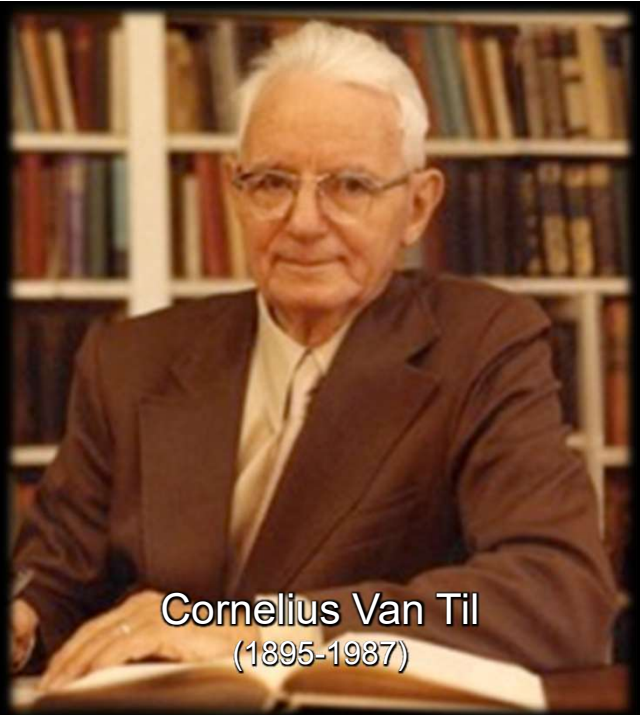
"In our arguments for the existence of God we have frequently assumed that you and we together have an area of knowledge on which we agree."



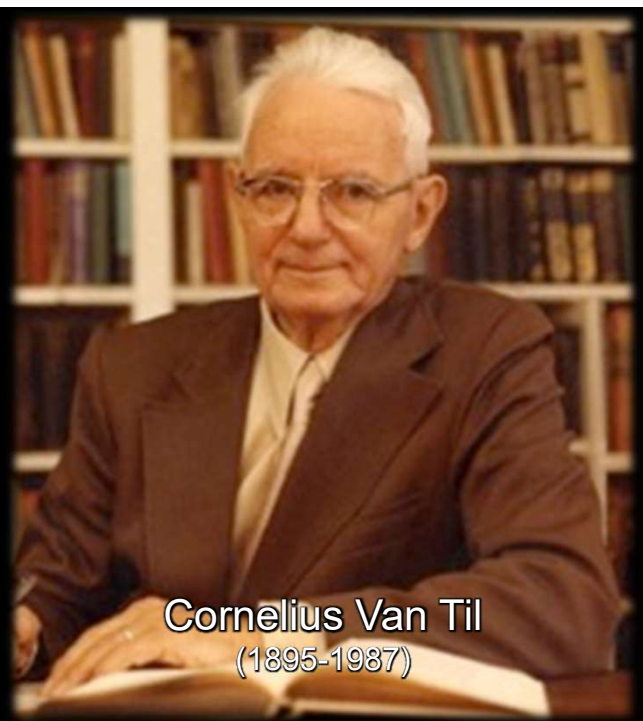
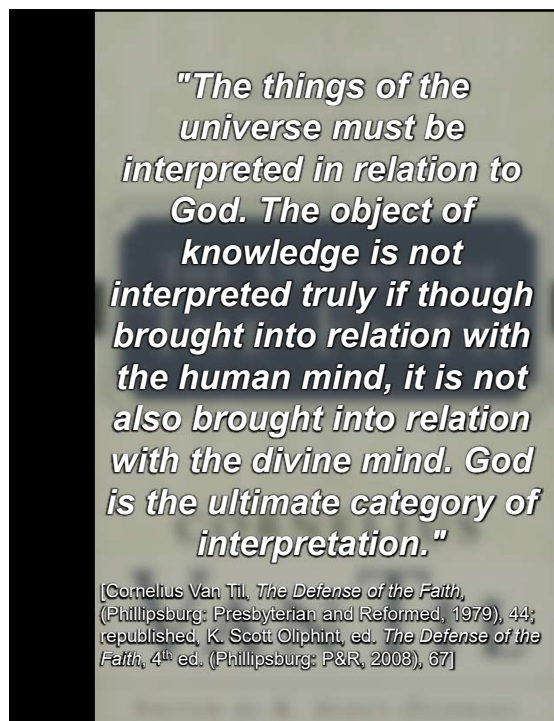
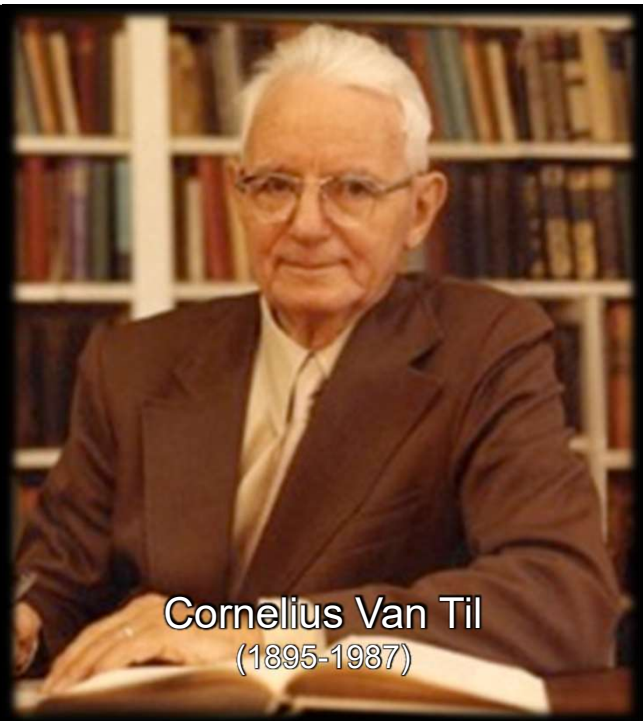
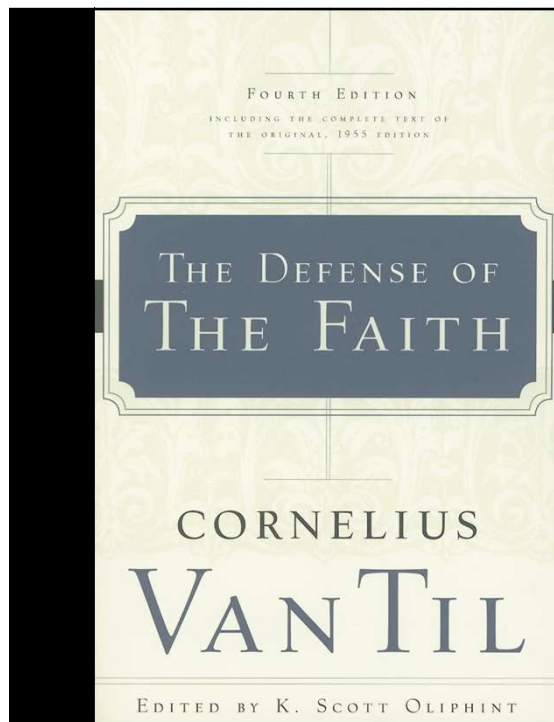
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

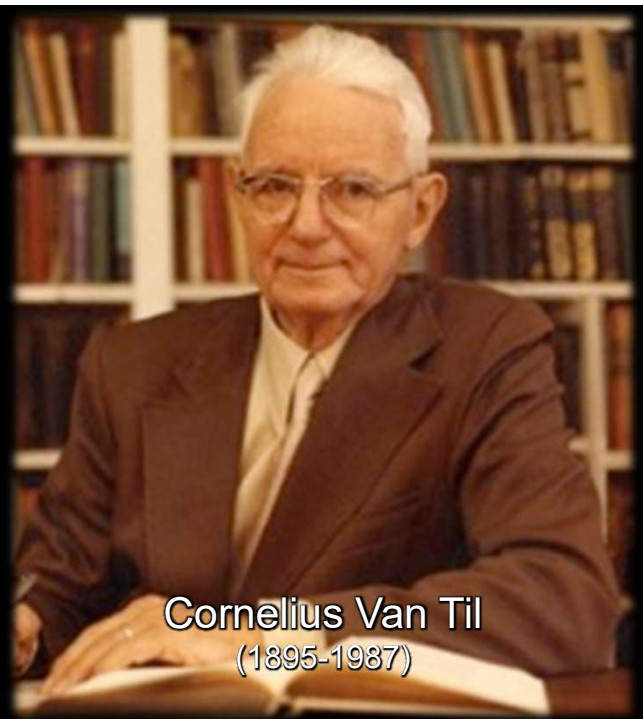
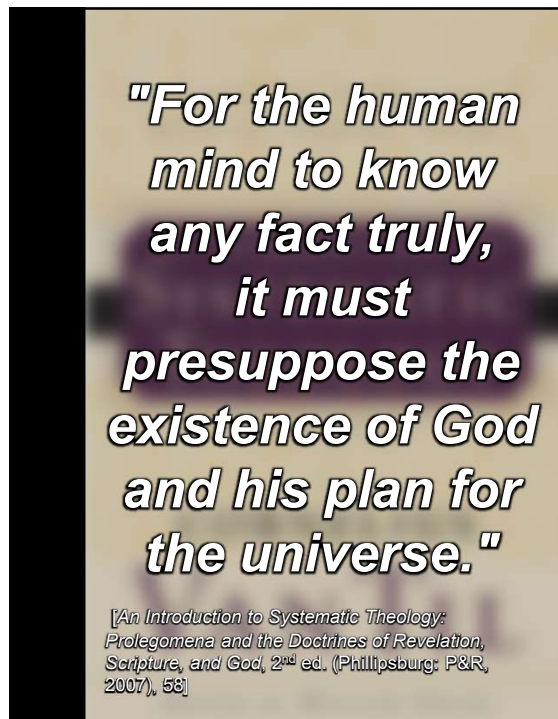
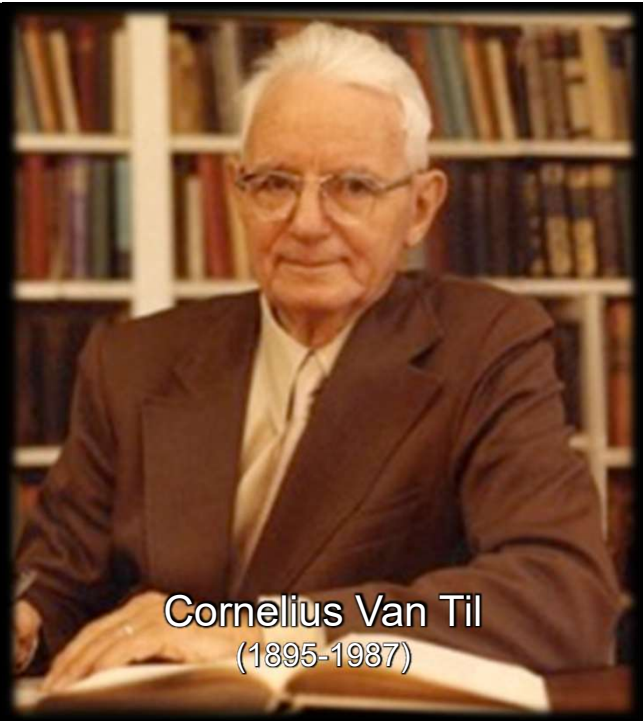
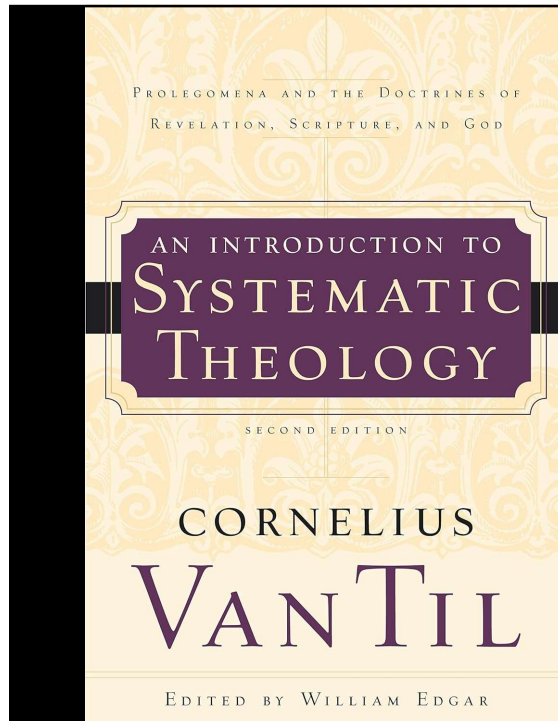
"But we really do not grant that you see any fact in any dimension of life truly. We really think you have colored glasses on your nose when you talk about chickens and cows, as well as when you talk about the life hereafter."

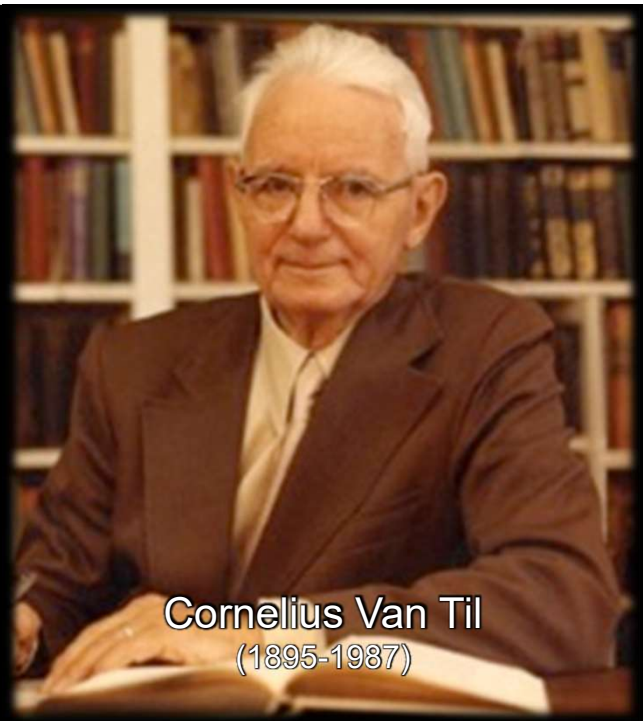
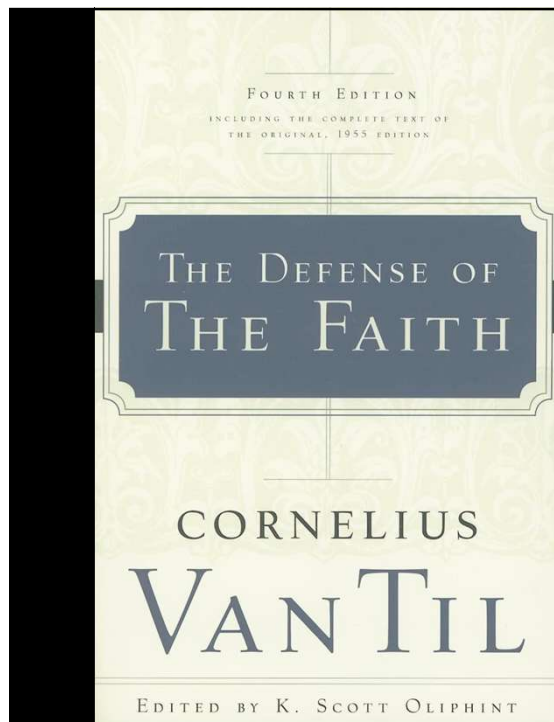
[Why I Believe in God (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.), 9]



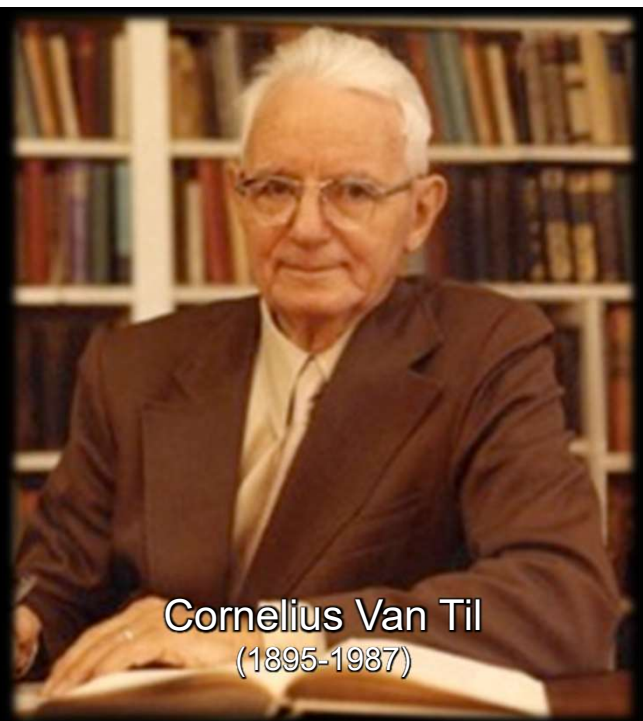
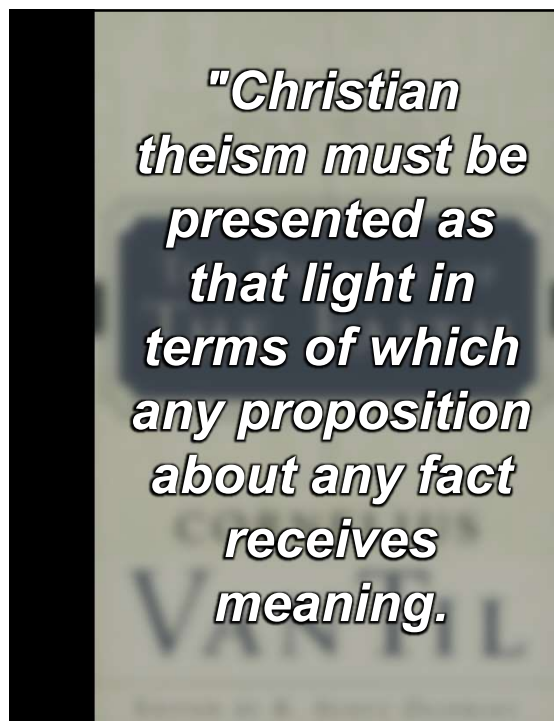
Cornelius Van Til
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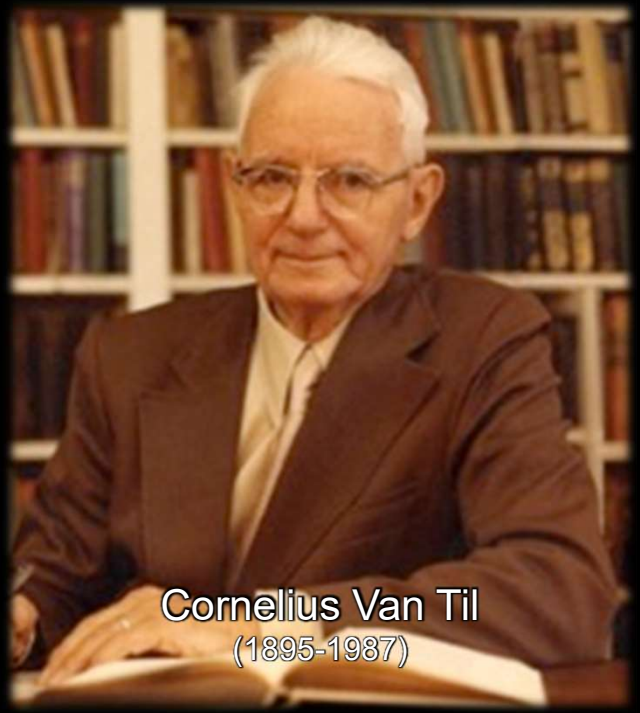
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

***"Without the
presupposition
of the truth of
Christian theism
no fact can be
distinguished
from any other
fact."***

[*The Defense of the Faith*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 115; ; republished, K. Scott Oliphint, ed. *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 137]

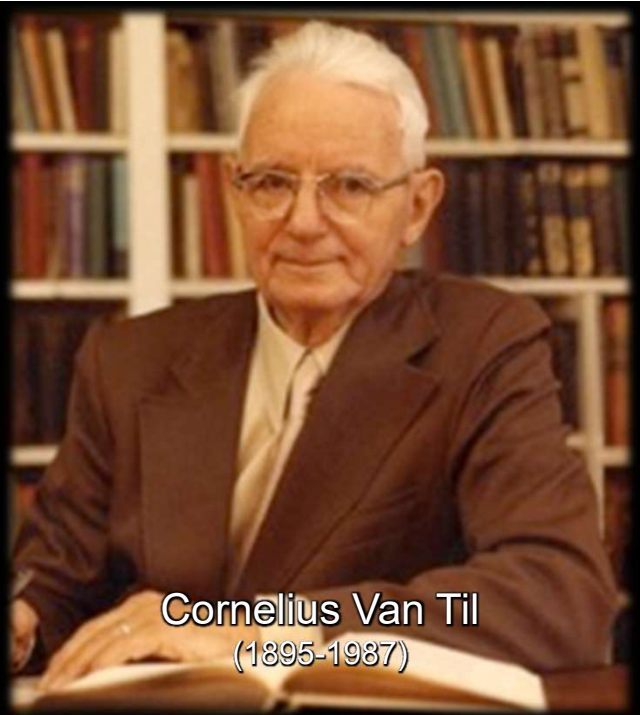


Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1937)

JERUSALEM and ATHENS

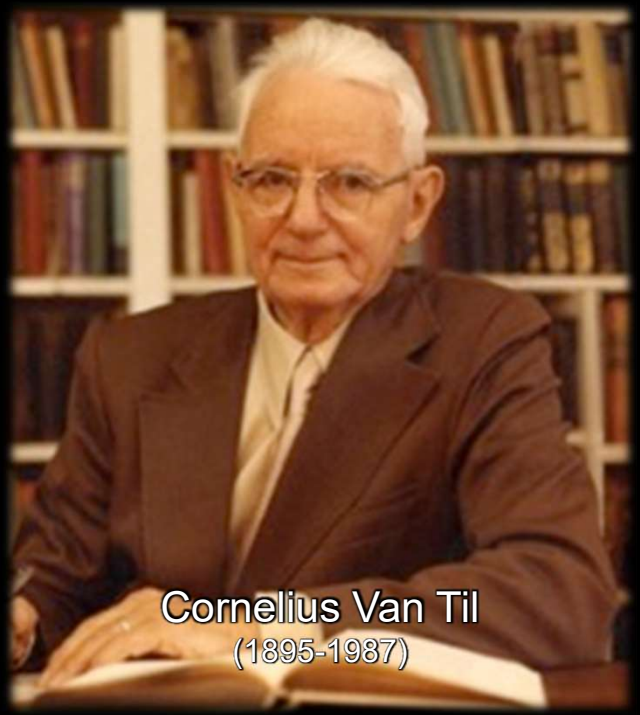
CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS ON
THE PHILOSOPHY AND
APOLOGETICS OF
CORNELIUS VAN TIL

EDITED BY E. R. GEEHAN



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1937)

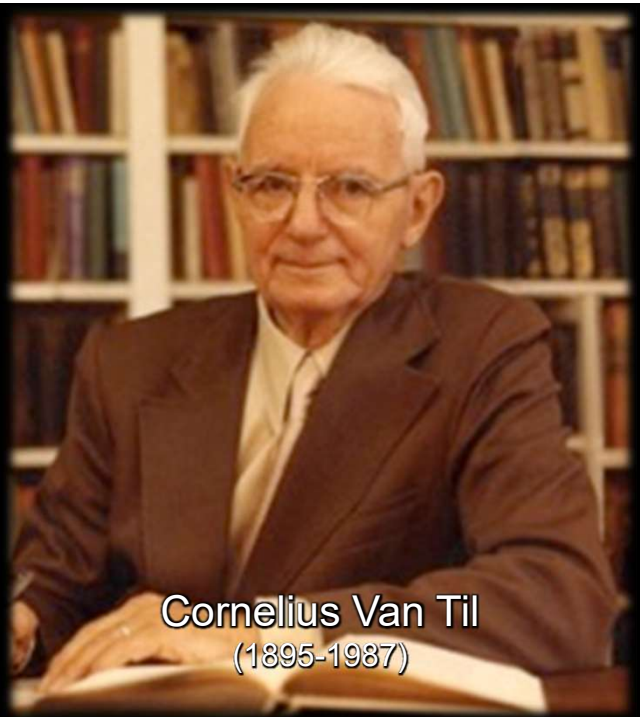
"If we allow that one intelligent word can be spoken about *being* or *knowing* or *acting* as such, without first introducing the Creator-creature distinction, we are sunk.



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"As Christians we must not allow that even such a thing as enumeration or counting can be *accounted for* except upon the presupposition of truth of what we are told in Scripture about the triune God as the Creator and Redeemer of the world."

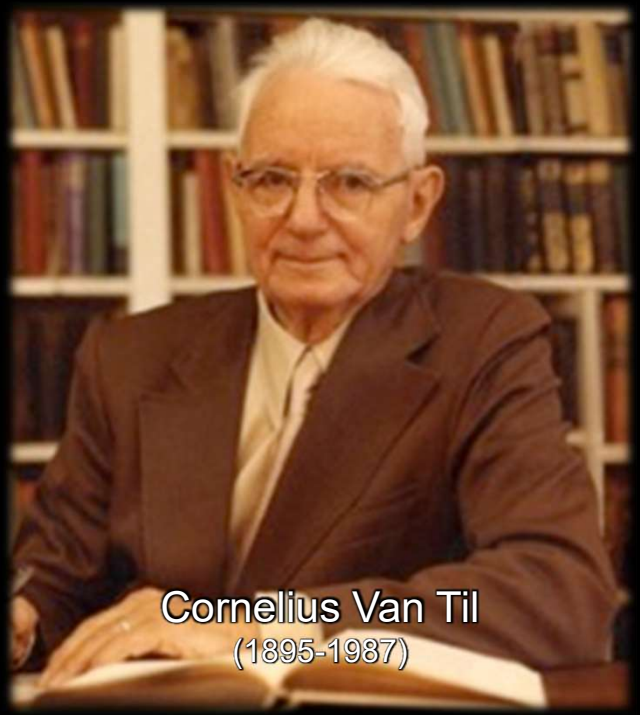
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Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"How I rejoiced when I found that men of great erudition and of deep penetration were pointing out that 'logic' and 'fact' can have no intelligible relation to one another unless it be upon the presupposition of the truth of the 'story' Christ has told us in the Scriptures. Or am I reading some of my own apologetic views into the writings of this 'revolutionary' group?"

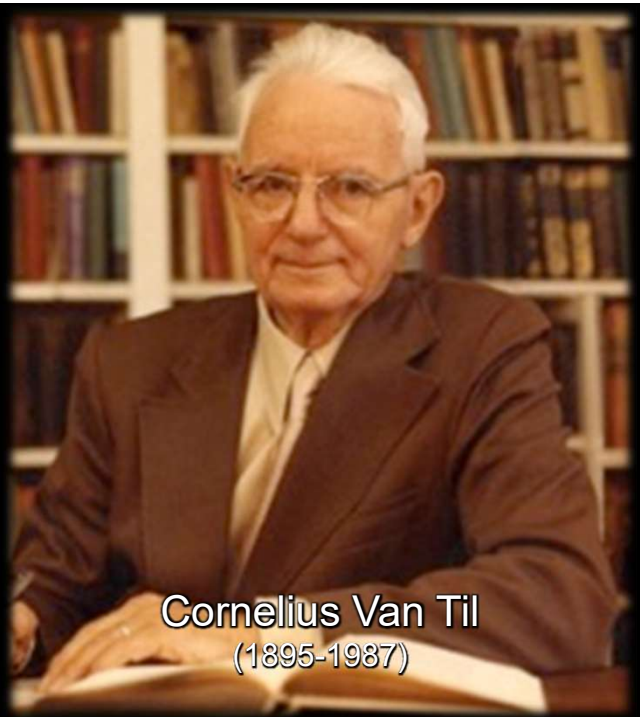
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Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"I believe that Christian apologetics, and in particular Reformed apologetics, is not really transcendental in its method unless it says at the outset of its dialogue with non-believers that the Christian position must be accepted on the authority of the self-identifying Christ of Scripture as the presupposition of human predication in any field."

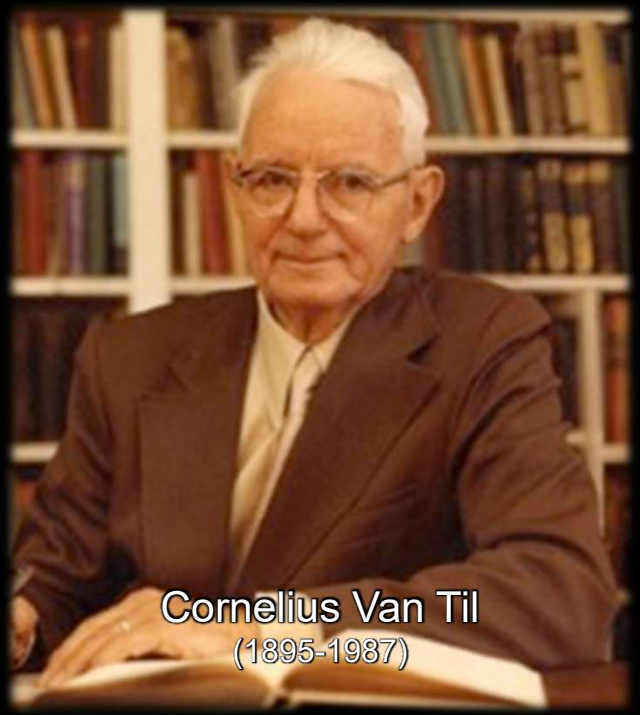
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Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"I believe that a Christian apologist must place himself for argument's sake upon the position of the non-believer and point out to him that he has to presuppose the truth of the Christian position even to oppose it."

["Response by Cornelius Van Til to Herman Dooyeweerd, 'Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought' in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 98]



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