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First Corinthians 2:6–16 and Cornelius Van Til

Some Exegetical Reflections on Richard Gaffin's 1995 Westminster Theological Journal Article

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Throughout its history, the *WESTMINSTER Theological Journal* (*WTJ*) published many articles written by Cornelius Van Til, and it also published many articles written about Van Til. The Spring 1995 issue of the journal, which commemorated the one hundredth birthday of Van Til, was unique in that the entire issue was devoted to articles related to his system of thought. This issue included articles by notable presuppositionalist scholars such as Greg L. Bahnsen, John M. Frame, William Edgar, K. Scott Oliphint, and others.

One of the most important articles found in this issue was authored by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. and titled "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16."[1] Gaffin's article is considered by some Van Tillians to be one of the definitive exegetical arguments in support of Van Til's teaching.[2] In 2007, Gaffin's article was

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1. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor. 2:6–16," *WTJ* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 103–24.

2. See, for example, Brian Mattson's blog post entitled *An Apologetic Thermopylae*.

republished in a slightly revised form in the multi-authored compilation *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, edited by K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton.[3] Given the esteem in which Gaffin's article is held by some Van Tillian theologians, it is worthy of careful consideration by all who are interested in the debate over Van Til's system of thought.[4]

Gaffin's stated purpose in his article is to provide "some of the exegetical support for several key emphases in Van Til's epistemology."[5] As Gaffin himself explains, Van Til's "approach is assertive and dogmatizing, rather than exegetical."[6] Van Til simply did not do any substantial exegesis of Scripture in any of his many writings. Unfortunately, although Gaffin states that he is aiming to provide exegetical support for some "key emphases" in Van Til's epistemology, he does not, at this point in the article, explain to the reader what those key emphases are. We cannot

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[https://brianmattson.substack.com/p/an-apologetic-thermopylae]. Mattson earned his M.A.R. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his PhD in systematic theology from the University of Aberdeen. He has contributed articles to the *WTJ* and a chapter to *The Future of Reformed Apologetics*, which was edited by K. Scott Oliphint. He is a respected scholarly proponent of Van Tillian presuppositionalism. In this blog post, Mattson writes: "Unless you can show me (or point me to somebody who has shown) any fundamental flaw in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.'s exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, or (to be more reasonable) that you have read it, digested it, and understood it, I cannot and will not take your enthusiasm for natural law/theology seriously, nor your smug dismissals of Cornelius Van Til and 'presuppositionalism.'"

3. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Corinthians 2:6–16," in K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds., *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2007), 13–40.

4. Because the slightly revised version of Gaffin's article found in the book *Revelation and Reason* is the most recent version, I will be citing that version in the body of this essay. However, because that book is now out of print and difficult to obtain, I will also provide in each relevant footnote the corresponding page number(s) for the original version in the *WTJ*.

5. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 14 (*WTJ*, 103).

6. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 14 (*WTJ*, 103). When Gaffin says Van Til's "approach is assertive and dogmatizing," it means exactly that. Van Til's writings are not only missing any substantive exegesis, but they are also very short on argumentation. Van Til dogmatically asserts his view as the correct view, but he rarely provides anything approaching an argument to establish the truth of his assertions.

accurately understand and evaluate Gaffin's argument without first getting a basic grasp of Van Til's thought.[7]

A Summary of Van Til's System of Thought

Van Til's system of thought begins with his doctrine of God. As Van Til explains, the Triune God has independent, immutable, infinite, and personal knowledge of himself. God has also eternally and freely decreed whatsoever comes to pass and therefore has perfect knowledge of every fact that he has decreed. God knows every decreed fact in relation to himself and in relation to every other fact within his unified plan. This is important to understand because knowledge is the key theme that runs through each major building block in Van Til's system of thought. According to Van Til, in order for there to be true knowledge of any fact, that fact has to be known in relation to every other fact and in relation to the whole system of knowledge of which that fact is a part. In other words, true knowledge is exhaustive knowledge. Because God is omniscient, God has such infinite and exhaustive knowledge. God, therefore, grounds the very possibility of human knowledge. Because God knows himself and every fact in relation to himself and to every other fact, God can also be said to have "pre-interpreted" every fact. Thus, there are no "brute facts." The true meaning of any fact is ultimately determined by its place in the eternal plan of God. God's knowledge of himself and of all things in relation to himself and in relation to his plan is, therefore, the ultimate true system of knowledge. God, therefore, is the ultimate principle for the interpretation of all facts.

The next element of Van Til's system of thought is the doctrine

7. The paragraphs that follow are a summary of my exposition of Van Til's thought in the first four chapters of my *Toward a Reformed Apologetics* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2024). Chapter five of that book examines the apologetical implications of the antithesis in Van Til's thought. For those interested in the evidence for each point in this summary, see *Toward a Reformed Apologetics*, 35–115.

of creation. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is within them, thus introducing a metaphysical distinction between the Creator and the creature. Among God's creatures were human beings whom he created in his image with rational and volitional faculties. Everything God created, including human beings, is exhaustively revelational of God and of the unified system of truth eternally and exhaustively known by God. Human beings were created in a covenant relationship with God and were, therefore, ethically required to interpret all facts in relation to God their Creator and in light of his special revelation to them. Human beings were created to be derivative re-interpreters of that which God had eternally pre-interpreted, thus making God the final reference point of all interpretation. If God is not taken as the final reference point, human beings would have to be the final reference point and would, therefore, have to be omniscient, since true knowledge of any fact requires true knowledge of every fact. Such omniscience is impossible for finite human minds. Human knowledge, however, does not have to be exhaustive because God's knowledge is exhaustive. Human knowledge is required only to be analogical to God's knowledge. This means that it is to be a finite reflection of God's infinite and exhaustive knowledge. Even though human knowledge is not exhaustive knowledge, it is true knowledge as far as it goes if it corresponds to God's exhaustive knowledge of himself and all things.

According to Van Til, when Adam and Eve sinned, they chose autonomy, making themselves, rather than God, the final reference point of interpretation. As a result of the fall, every human faculty, including the reason and the will, has been corrupted. Human beings after the fall are covenant breakers who are hostile to God. Because knowledge is a unified whole and because every fact is truly known only as it is understood in relation to God and every other fact, man's choice to make himself the final reference point of interpretation means that he no longer interprets any fact correctly. Fallen human beings do have a knowledge of God,

in one sense, because they cannot escape God's general revelation of himself, but because they hate God, they sinfully suppress that knowledge of God. Because they suppress the knowledge of God and reject the God-decreed and God-created nature of all things, not only do fallen human beings not know God truly, but they cannot truly know anything else either. Because fallen human beings do not know created facts truly, they cannot reason from created facts to their Creator, and this means that all attempts at natural theology are futile. Although fallen man cannot, in principle, know any fact truly, God, in his common grace, restrains fallen human beings from carrying their principle of interpretation to its fullest extent. As a result of God's common grace, fallen human beings can and do achieve some measure of knowledge about the natural world that is true as far as it goes.

Van Til turns next to the doctrine of redemption and the resulting antithesis. When God, as a result of his special grace, regenerates some human beings, he enables them once again to have true knowledge of God and of created facts. Regenerated human beings are now able to understand Scripture, and in the light of Scripture, they are now able to understand all facts as they truly are. Thus, as a result of God's redemptive work, there is now an antithesis between two types of human beings (believers and unbelievers) and between two principles of interpretation. Believers are able to reason analogically again, and because they make God the ultimate principle of interpretation, they are able to have true, although not exhaustive, knowledge. Unbelievers continue to reason univocally, and because they make themselves the ultimate principle of interpretation, they cannot know anything truly when they use that principle consistently. Because they use two antithetical principles of interpretation, believers and unbelievers have nothing in common epistemologically even though they have everything in common metaphysically. As a result of the absolute epistemological antithesis, there can be no compromise or neutrality between the believer and the

unbeliever. Their worldviews are mutually exclusive, and the conflict between them is an all-out war. The absolute antithesis has implications for our apologetic methodology. Because there is an absolute epistemological antithesis between the believer and the unbeliever, the only possible method of apologetics is the method of presupposition.

The key element of Van Til's epistemology is the idea that true knowledge is exhaustive knowledge. In certain branches of philosophy, this is known as "epistemological holism." A version of this was taught by the British idealists that Van Til devoted much of his life to studying. As Van Til explains it, true knowledge is knowledge of any fact in its relation to God and in its relation to every other fact. He writes:

> For the Christian system, knowledge consists in understanding the relation of any fact to God as revealed in Scripture. I know a fact truly to the extent that I understand the *exact* relation such a fact sustains to the plan of God. It is the plan of God that gives any fact meaning in terms of the plan of God. The whole meaning of any fact is exhausted by its position in and relation to the plan of God. This implies that every fact is related to every other fact. God's plan is a unit. And it is this unity of the plan of God, founded as it is in the very being of God, that gives the unity that we look for between all the finite facts. If one should maintain that one fact can be fully understood without reference to all other facts, he is as much antitheistic as when he should maintain that one fact can be understood without reference to God.[8]

That understanding of true knowledge is assumed throughout Van Til's system, and it undergirds another key element in his

8. Cornelius Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 6.

thought, namely that, in principle, fallen human beings do not know any fact truly because they do not make God the ultimate principle of interpretation. Van Til is not merely saying that unbelievers do not know God truly. They also do not have true knowledge of any fact in nature. In order to have true knowledge of the facts of nature, special revelation is necessary. We cannot truly know the facts of nature apart from special revelation because special revelation puts those facts in their proper relation to God and all other facts. Special revelation, however, cannot be understood apart from the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration. Therefore, only those who have been regenerated and given the gift of faith can truly know the facts of nature because only they can understand those facts in light of special revelation. This is why there is an absolute antithesis between the knowledge of the believer and the unbeliever. As we will see, when Gaffin speaks of providing "some of the exegetical support for several key emphases in Van Til's epistemology," he is referring especially to two ideas: (1) epistemological holism and (2) the necessity of special revelation for understanding any fact whatsoever.

Gaffin's Argument: Part One

1. Explication

Gaffin's thesis is that exegetical support for Van Til's key epistemological emphases can be found in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16. In order to determine whether Gaffin successfully defends his claim that Paul teaches the key emphases of Van Til's epistemology, we will proceed step by step through his argument.

Gaffin begins by asserting that, in this passage, Paul is explaining the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God.[9] He says that, in fact, "this passage is a virtual commentary on teaching

9. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 14–15 (*WTJ*, 104).

in Matthew 11:25–27/Luke 10:21–22."[10] According to Gaffin, then, before we can turn to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2, we have to understand what Jesus is saying about God's work of revelation in these Gospel passages. The passage in Matthew 11:25–27 reads:

> At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things [*tauta*] from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; [26] yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. [27] All things [*panta*] have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."[11]

The parallel passage in Luke 10:21–22 is almost identical:

> In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things [*tauta*] from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. [22] All things [*panta*] have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Gaffin begins his discussion of these passages under the heading "*The Activity of Revelation: The* Sola *of Revelation*." He observes first that in Luke 10, there is a contrast between "hidden"

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10. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 15 (*WTJ*, 104).

11. All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

and "revealed." The contrast between these two ideas "clearly points up the sense of this primary word for *revelation* (*apokalyptō*/ἀποκαλύπτω) in the New Testament. What is revealed is otherwise hidden, a disclosure of the previously veiled."[12] Gaffin then adds:

> Further, what is revealed remains hidden from "the wise and the intelligent" (*sophōn kai synetōn*/σοφών καί συνετών); the latter word may also be rendered "learned," "having understanding." What is revealed, then, is beyond all human capacity and competence, whether rational or intuitive; revelation is inaccessible to human potential in its highest actualizations. In other words, Jesus asserts the absolute, exclusive necessity of revelation.[13]

Gaffin explains, "There is nothing here to suggest that revelation is an alternate, and therefore essentially dispensable, means of communicating what could also be arrived at by the use of reason or some other human capacity."[14] Note the emphasis here on the necessity of revelation. The question we have to ask as we proceed is: "the necessity of revelation for what?" Gaffin's answer to that question will be the key point he makes in this first part of his article.

Not only is revelation necessary, but faith is also necessary. Gaffin explains:

> Just as revelation is necessary, because what is revealed is not an intellectual attainment or any other human accomplishment, so the necessary condition in its recipients

12. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 15–16 (*WTJ*, 104–105).

13. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 16 (*WTJ*, 105).

14. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 16 (*WTJ*, 105).

> is faith, the receptive humility that stems from faith alone; the necessity of revelation involves the necessity of faith. In this sense there is an unbreakable correlation between revelation and its reception, and faith.[15]

Gaffin then observes the similarity between this passage and Matthew 13:11 where Jesus says: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (cf. Luke 8:10).[16] The "you" who have been given this knowledge are those with faith.

Gaffin continues his discussion of these Gospel passages under the heading "*The Content of Revelation: The* Tota *of Revelation*." It is in this section of the article that Gaffin will begin to make his most significant claims. He says, "The scope of what is revealed is designated here as 'these things' (*tauta*/ταύτα, Luke 10:21) and 'all things' (*panta*/πάντα, v. 22)."[17] Note the assertion that both the *tauta* and the *panta* refer to the scope of what is revealed. This point will become important as Gaffin proceeds. He notes that "*tauta* has no explicit grammatical antecedent, either within the passage or in the preceding verses. That suggests a looser, more general reference, back to the 'things' (miracles) done by Jesus in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt. 11:20 24; Luke 10:13–15)."[18] In short, "we are on sound footing in saying that 'these things' are, in other words, the things of the kingdom of God/heaven (cf. in the immediate context, Matt. 11:11–13; Luke 10:9)."[19]

At this point, Gaffin begins to move toward the key idea in his entire argument. He writes:

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15. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 16 (*WTJ*, 105).

16. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 17 (*WTJ*, 105).

17. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 17 (*WTJ*, 105).

18. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 17 (*WTJ*, 105–106).

19. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 17 (*WTJ*, 106).

> With that sort of summation the wider ramifications of this passage begin to emerge. According to the Synoptics, the kingdom of God is at once the central and all-encompassing theme of the proclamation of Jesus during his earthly ministry. As such it is not limited in scope or confined to some restricted sector or dimension of concerns. Rather, the kingdom is an eschatological reality, comprehensively considered.[20]

Gaffin next explains the implications of the comprehensiveness of the kingdom:

> Consequently, "these things," as the content of revelation, are to be considered comprehensively. They are in fact 'all things' (v. 22)—that is, all that has its origin in the unique fellowship of knowledge between Father and Son and is purposed by them for revelation in and by the Son (v. 22). Or, as already noted, they are all that is revealed and brought to realization in the coming of the kingdom.[21]

What this means is that the things hidden from the wise and revealed to little children are *all things*. This answers the question raised above. Revelation and faith are necessary for the knowledge of *all things*. This claim will be the basis for what Gaffin will say about Paul's epistemology in Part Two of his article.

Lest there be any doubt about Gaffin argument here, he clarifies his point saying:

> It might appear that this kingdom qualification somehow limits the scope of "all things." But, to the contrary according to the New Testament, there is nothing in the

20. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 17 (*WTJ*, 106).

21. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 18 (*WTJ*, 106).

> entire creation that is irrelevant to the kingdom; absolutely nothing falls outside the eschatological rule of Christ.[22]

Gaffin explains:

> The implications of Jesus' words, in context, are entirely decisive. Their momentousness, though often missed, is inescapable. There is no area or dimension of human knowledge that lies outside the scope of the revelation in view in these verses, or for which that revelation is irrelevant. Any epistemological endeavor true to these verses recognizes its absolute, exclusive dependence on such revelation. To be truly "wise and learned" in the creation, one must become a 'little child' and receive the revelation of God in Christ. Involved here is the epistemological ultimacy of the Creator-creature distinction, the unconditional dependence of creatures made in God's image, a dependence upon him for knowing as well as being.[23]

In other words, because there is nothing outside the scope of Christ's kingdom (because "all things have been handed over to me by my Father"), there is no area of human knowledge outside the scope of revelation as described in these verses. Therefore, special revelation is required for knowledge of any and every fact. Furthermore, this special revelation is given only to those who know the Son, those who are given faith.

Gaffin wraps up the section of his article saying: "In sum: according to Jesus, revelation is the exclusive and comprehensive *principium* for human knowledge, its foundation and norm. In terms of classical Reformation predicates, revelation involves both a *sola* and a *tota*."[24]

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22. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 18 (*WTJ*, 106).

23. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 18–19 (*WTJ*, 107).

24. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 19 (*WTJ*, 107).

2. Evaluation

Because of their importance to Gaffin's entire article, we need to note very carefully exactly what he is saying about the meaning of these passages in Matthew 11 and Luke 10. According to Gaffin, the Father has hidden something referred to as "these things" from the wise and has revealed "these things" to little children. The revelation of "these things" is a disclosure of things previously veiled prior to the coming of Christ. That is the very meaning of the word "revelation" according to Gaffin. Access to that which is revealed ("these things") is beyond all human capacity. It is impossible to achieve knowledge of "these things" by means of the use of reason or any other human capacity. Special revelation is, therefore, absolutely necessary for there to be any human knowledge of "these things."

Furthermore, faith is necessary to receive the special revelation of "these things." Gaffin appeals to Matthew 13:11 here. In this verse, Jesus says, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." According to Gaffin's explanation, the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven" are "these things" which have been hidden from the wise and revealed to little children. "These things" are the things of the kingdom of God. Because the kingdom of God comprehends "all things," the content of revelation ("these things") also comprehends all things. What this means, therefore, is that "these things" that are hidden from the wise and revealed to little children are *all things*. There is no element of human knowledge that is not included in "these things." In short, Gaffin's claim in the first part of his article is that when Jesus speaks of "these things" which are hidden from the wise and revealed to little ones, he is talking about *all human knowledge*.

The question we have to ask is whether this is actually what Jesus is saying in this passage and its parallel in Luke 10. The answer is no. Jesus is talking about something more specific

when he speaks of "these things." As John Calvin explains in his commentary on Matthew 11 and Luke 10, it is specifically "the mysteries of the gospel" that are hidden from the wise and revealed to the little children.[25] The Father sovereignly and graciously reveals these specific things to whomsoever he chooses to reveal them and he gives those whom he chooses the gift of faith. Special revelation is necessary for the knowledge of the mysteries of the Gospel because, as the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) explains, "the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence," which are not hidden from anyone (cf. Rom. 1:19–20) and through which some more general knowledge of God is revealed to all human beings, "are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation" (WCF I.1).

In other words, according to the WCF, the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do reveal some knowledge of God. They reveal "the goodness, wisdom, and power of God." That knowledge of God is sufficient to leave men without excuse, but it is not sufficient for a saving knowledge of God. The knowledge of God which is necessary unto salvation requires special revelation. The WCF differentiates between these two kinds of knowledge of God. Gaffin effectively conflates them, arguing that special revelation is necessary for both.

In his exegesis of this passage, Gaffin is saying things that are true when said of the saving knowledge gained through special revelation. That knowledge *is* hidden from the wise and revealed to the little children. But Gaffin is also conflating the knowledge of God known through special revelation with the knowledge of God known through general revelation, and the knowledge of God known through general revelation is manifested to all (cf. Rom. 1:19–20). In addition to this, Gaffin also conflates

25. John Calvin, commentary on Matthew 11:25 and Luke 10:21, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), XVI/2, 37, 38.

the knowledge of God with the knowledge of all other things (e.g. knowledge of things like rocks and trees). When all of these kinds of knowledge are conflated, the claims Gaffin is making are not even remotely true.

There is an important difference between the knowledge of created things such as rocks and trees, the knowledge of God that can be known by means of an examination of God's general revelation through such created things, and the saving knowledge of God and the gospel that can be known only through God's special revelation. The way in which we come to knowledge of each of these is also different. When Matthew 11 and Luke 10 are read in context, it is evident that "these things" that are hidden from the wise and revealed to little children are things that concern the saving knowledge of God that is a result of God's special revelation. To be more specific, "these things" refers to saving knowledge concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Gaffin is also correct when he begins his article by speaking of the revelation of "these things" as a disclosure of that which was previously veiled, things that were not fully revealed until the coming of Christ. He also correctly notes that the content of this revelation is stated in Matthew 13:11 where Jesus says: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." It is precisely here, however, where we see more evidence for the impossibility of Gaffin's interpretation of "these things."

If we look at the entire context of Jesus's words in Matthew 13:11, we notice that Jesus says something very important for our purposes here. In verse 17, at the end of this passage, Jesus says: "For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." The "prophets and righteous people" are OT believers.[26] In other words, "these things"

26. See, for example, W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, ICC (London:

were hidden from righteous OT believers just as today they are hidden from the wise. God did not reveal "these things" to these OT believers. God revealed "these things" only at the coming of Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10–12; Heb. 11:13). What is the result, then, if we interpret "these things" as referring to all human knowledge of all things? If we were to apply Gaffin's interpretation consistently, we would have not only an absolute epistemological antithesis between the believer and the unbeliever, but we would also have an absolute epistemological antithesis between NT believers and OT believers.[27]

Because Gaffin appeals to Matthew 13:11 at this point, it is important to note that the word translated "secrets" in that verse is the Greek word *mystēria*. As G. K. Beale and Benjamin Gladd have explained in their treatment of this important biblical theme, the word "mystery" in Scripture refers to "*the revelation of God's partially hidden wisdom, particularly as it concerns events occurring in the* '*latter days*.'"[28] They point out that "the book of Daniel and early Judaism present mystery as a revelation concerning the end-time events that were previously hidden but have been subsequently revealed. Critical to understanding the biblical mystery is the nature of hiddenness."[29] In other words, when Christ (or the apostles) speak of the revelation of a "mystery," they are speaking of something that is not completely new revelation. Instead, it is something that was largely hidden in the OT and is only fully revealed with the coming of Christ. However, even after the coming of Christ, a "mystery" is not fully revealed to all. It is known and

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T&T Clark International, 1991), 395; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 515.

27. I would like to thank my colleague Matthew Dudreck for this observation.

28. G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 20.

29. Beale and Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed*, 30.

understood only by those with faith, those who are graciously given eyes to see and ears to hear.

What this means is that Gaffin is correct to note the centrality of the kingdom theme in Jesus's teaching, but he is incorrect in concluding that Jesus is speaking of the kingdom in a way that lays the foundation for a modernist theory of epistemological holism. To read Jesus's words in that way ignores both the immediate and wider context and completely misses the point of his teaching.[30] It is missing the point, for example, that Jesus is inaugurating the long-awaited and promised kingdom in an unexpected way and that this is at least part of the reason why he speaks of the kingdom in terms of a "mystery." The unexpected way in which the kingdom has come helps us understand why some believe Jesus and others reject him. Some believe and others do not because "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matt. 13:11). Or, to use the words of Jesus in Matthew 11, "you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children."

Beale and Gladd explain what it is specifically about Jesus's kingdom teaching that is a "mystery." What makes it a mystery "is its contrast with the Old Testament and Jewish expectation of the kingdom."

30. I have noted elsewhere that Van Til tended to read all of Scripture with the modernist problem of knowledge at the forefront of his mind and that this obsessive preoccupation with epistemology caused him to distort the meaning of Scripture. We see the same problem here in Gaffin's interpretation of Jesus's teaching. Gaffin is reading something into Jesus's words that simply is not there. He does not provide exegetical support for Van Til. He provides an eisegetical basis for Van Til's teaching, and worse, what is being read into Scripture is the very doctrine that this article was written to defend. Gaffin's eisegesis creates a completely self-enclosed circular argument because it reads Van Til's modernist epistemology into Scripture and then uses that distorted reading of Scripture to provide evidence for the truth of Van Til's modernist epistemology. For more on the effects of this problem in Van Til, see my *Toward a Reformed Apologetics*,129–30.

> One of the main tenets of the prophesied latter-day kingdom is the *consummate* establishment of God's kingdom directly preceded by the ultimate destruction of unrighteousness and foreign oppression. The advent of the Messiah would signal the death knell of evil empires. Pagan kings and their kingdoms were to be destroyed or "crushed" (Dan 2:44), and the Messiah would "shatter all their substance with an iron rod" (*Pss. Sol.* 17:24). Such a defeat and judgment would be decisive and happen all at once at the end point of history. But here Jesus claims that the advent of the Messiah and the latter-day kingdom does not happen all at once, since a complete defeat and judgment of the wicked does not occur. Paradoxically, two realms coexist—those who belong to the Kingdom and those who belong to the "evil one."[31]

In other words, one of the things that was largely hidden in the OT was the already/not yet nature of the latter days kingdom.[32] As we will see, Paul will also use the word "mystery" in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, and it is just as important to understand how Paul uses it there as it is to understand how Jesus is using it in his teaching.

The main exegetical argument that Gaffin uses to make the claim that "these things" refers to all knowledge is the comprehensive nature of Christ's kingdom. Recall that Gaffin argues that because there is nothing outside the scope of Christ's kingdom, there is no area of human knowledge outside the scope of revelation as described in these verses. Both are equally comprehensive. But this simply does not follow. The comprehensive nature of Christ's kingdom does not imply that special revelation is necessary for all human knowledge any more than the fact that God's knowledge is comprehensive implies that special revelation

31. Beale and Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed*, 69.

32. Beale and Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed*, 74.

is necessary for all human knowledge. There is nothing in the text of Matthew 11 or Luke 10 leading from the one to the other.

Furthermore, there are numerous clear texts of Scripture (e.g., Rom. 1:19–20) indicating that some human knowledge does not require special revelation. Some human knowledge of God, for example, comes through general revelation. And general revelation itself assumes some knowledge of the created things through which that general revelation comes. The heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1). When we contemplate the heavens, they manifest or reveal the goodness, wisdom, and power of God. But we cannot contemplate the heavens if we have no knowledge of the heavens. We gain some knowledge of the heavens through observation. When we contemplate that knowledge, some knowledge of God is revealed (general revelation). That knowledge is insufficient for salvation; therefore special revelation is necessary for the saving knowledge of God.

In addition, the very way in which special revelation comes to human beings in human language presupposes an already existing knowledge of that human language and the things that language signifies. In other words, the knowledge of human language and of that which it signifies is a prerequisite for the human reception of verbal special revelation. Some human knowledge is assumed, therefore, and required by the very nature of special revelation in human language. If that is the case, then it is false to assert that special revelation is required for all human knowledge. Jesus's words simply cannot be interpreted in a way that flatly contradicts other clear teachings of the inspired Word of God and the very nature of the inspired Word of God.

The key point is that when Jesus speaks of the things that have been revealed to Christians and hidden from unbelievers, he is speaking of a new stage in the redemptive-historical revelation of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. He is not talking about some abstract philosophical point regarding the nature of human knowledge. That may be Gaffin's concern in advocating

for Van Til, but it is not Jesus's concern in this passage, and when we read a foreign concern into Jesus's teaching, we minimize and obscure his real concern, namely that those gospel truths that are necessary for salvation are known only through special revelation and are received only by those to whom God graciously gives the gift of faith. As we will see, Paul too is talking about these specific gospel truths in 1 Corinthians 2.

Gaffin's Arguement: Part Two

1. Explication

As we turn to 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, we recall that Gaffin considers it likely that this passage is a commentary on Matthew 11:25–27 and Luke 10:21–22. At the very least they share common themes.[33] In the first major section of 1 Corinthians (1:18–3:23), one of these key themes is "wisdom." According to Gaffin, this section of Paul's letter makes at least two major points about wisdom. First, "a clash—a sharp, unrelieved antithesis—exists between 'the wisdom of God' (1:21) and the wisdom of unbelief."[34] That which is foolish in the eyes of the world is wisdom in the eyes of God, and that which is wisdom in the eyes of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God. Second, "The wisdom of God is not ultimately cognitive or merely intellectual."[35]

Gaffin says that 2:6–16, since it falls within the first major section of the letter, "is a direct, even essential, continuation of the previous argumentation with its basic antithetical theme."[36] It is necessary first, then, to look at what Paul writes in these verses:

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33. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 19 (*WTJ*, 107).

34. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 19 (*WTJ*, 108).

35. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 20 (*WTJ*, 108).

36. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 21 (*WTJ*, 109).

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is
not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are
doomed to pass away. 7 But we impart a secret and hidden
wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our
glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if
they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9
But, as it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him"—

10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.
For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.
11 For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of
that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends
the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we
have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who
is from God, that we might understand the things freely
given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught
by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting
spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. 14 The natural
person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for
they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them
because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual person
judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.
16 "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to
instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

According to Gaffin the antithesis between God's view of wisdom and foolishness and the world's view of wisdom and foolishness is eschatological in nature. He explains, "The plain implication, then, of verses 6, 7 and 9 (whatever the source of the supporting citation in the latter) is that 'God's wisdom' (2:7), granted to

believers, is of the aeon to come, the new and final world-age; it is, in a word, eschatological wisdom."[37] The rulers of this age do not understand the gospel, and that failure is epistemological. This means, according to Gaffin, that there is an "epistemological difference between believers and unbelievers, a difference of the most radical and far-reaching sort, in that it does not go too far to say believers and unbelievers belong to two different worlds; they exist in not only separate but antithetical 'universes of discourse.'"[38] Therefore, "there is no point of contact epistemologically between believers and unbelievers, however understood, whether by empirical observation or by rational reflection and speculation."[39] This epistemological antithesis is rooted in the idea that special revelation is required for all knowledge and that the reception of this revelation requires faith. Unbelievers, by definition, lack faith. Therefore, they do not receive the special revelation that is required for all knowledge. Only believers receive that special revelation. Therefore, there is no epistemological point of contact.

In the following verses, Paul turns to an examination of the work of the Holy Spirit. Gaffin explains:

> First Corinthians 2:10–16 also brings out the comprehensive role of the Spirit in revelation. He initiates both the giving and receiving of revelation; he is both knower and communicator. Verses 10–11 address the former. The Spirit functions in revelation because he has the requisite investigative competence. He has the capacity for the comprehensive probing and searching (*erauna*/ἐραυνα) adequate to "all things," including "even the deep things of God." As investigator he is omnicompetent.[40]

37. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 22 (*WTJ*, 109–110).

38. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 23 (*WTJ*, 110).

39. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 23 (*WTJ*, 111).

40. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 25 (*WTJ*, 112).

At this point in Gaffin's argument, he begins to tie Part One of his article to Part Two. He writes: "The Spirit now comes into view as given to and indwelling believers ('we have received . . .'), specifically so that they may understand 'the things freely given to us by God.'"[41] Why is this important? Gaffin explains that "the things freely given to us by God" in this passage is equivalent to "these things" in Matthew 11 and Luke 10. In other words, "the things freely given to us by God" is comprehensive of all things.[42] Gaffin affirms the connection by saying, "Here again, as in Jesus' teaching, but in an even more emphatic, antithetic fashion, emerge the twin factors of exclusiveness and comprehensiveness, both the *sola* and the *tota* of revelation."[43]

Paul here also distinguishes between the "natural person" (*psychikos anthrōpos*) and the "spiritual person" (*ho pneumatikos*). The natural person cannot understand the things of God's Spirit. As Gaffin explains:

> It is not simply that such a person will not or refuses to accept what he right well knows to be true. No, he won't because he can't. Expressed here is a total cognitive inability, an incapacity that exists "because they [the things of the Spirit] are spiritually discerned," that is, they are properly appraised and assessed only through the Spirit's activity. Here, again, yawns the unbridgeable epistemological gulf between this age and the age to come, the nothing-less-than eschatological chasm between belief and unbelief. Calvin's pungent comment on 1:20 comes to mind: faced with God's revelation, the unbeliever is like an ass at a concert.[44]

41. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 26 (*WTJ*, 112).

42. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 26 (*WTJ*, 112–113).

43. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 27 (*WTJ*, 113).

44. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 28 (*WTJ*, 114).

Only the spiritual person, the one who has received God's wisdom through God's revelation, can understand the things of God's Spirit.

Had we not already observed Gaffin's claims in Part One of this article, we might think Gaffin is taking about a certain subset of knowledge, that knowledge which comes through special revelation and is necessary for salvation. Gaffin, however, makes it clear that he is asserting the same comprehensiveness here that he asserted with regard to Matthew 11 and Luke 10. The *tota* is found in 1 Corinthians 2 as well as in the Gospel passages. Gaffin explains:

> we must not tone down this passage or domesticate Paul's *panta*. His point is hardly that revelation is restricted in its relevance to only a part of life, or, following Kant, concerns only the moral-religious dimension of human experience. Rather, God's eschatological wisdom, focused in Christ's cross and resurrection, is still in view here, as that elaborates Jesus' sweeping kingdom vision in Matthew 11/Luke 10. Such wisdom, Paul is saying, has a bearing on, in fact *is essential for, a true knowledge of everything there is to know about God, ourselves, and the world*.[45]

In sum, as Gaffin explains:

> A controlling viewpoint in this passage, a theistic, fully Trinitarian point, is that the saving revelation of God in Christ, taught by the Holy Spirit, is the indispensable key to rightly understanding God himself and, with that understanding, literally everything (*panta*) in his creation.[46]

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45. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 29 (*WTJ*, 115), emphasis mine.

46. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 30 (*WTJ*, 116).

2. Evaluation

Again, it is important that we understand what Gaffin is asserting in this section of his article. His claim is that Paul is saying that only the spiritual person can have any true knowledge or understanding of God, and only the spiritual person can have any true knowledge or understanding of anything in creation. The spiritual person alone can have any true knowledge of anything because to the spiritual person alone has been revealed "the things freely given us by God." The natural man, on the contrary, cannot have any true knowledge of God or of anything in God's creation.

The question we are forced to ask is whether this is what Paul is saying in this passage, and again the answer is an unequivocal no. Gaffin cites John Calvin approvingly at various places in this article, so it may prove instructive to observe what Calvin says. As Calvin explains, when Paul speaks of "the things freely given us by God," the things which the natural person does not accept because they are folly to him, he is talking specifically about "the doctrine of the gospel."[47] Paul is not conflating knowledge of the doctrine of the Gospel with knowledge of everything in creation. To assert that Paul is making any such claim entirely misses the point Paul is making in this passage.

It is important to observe that, just as in the case of Matthew 11 and Luke 10, Paul here in 2:7 uses the word "mystery." Paul uses it to describe the wisdom of God that he is imparting. In other words, "the things freely given us by God" are termed a "mystery." We observed that one major element of the mystery of the kingdom in the Gospels is that it did not come in exactly the way the Jews expected it to arrive. It was not consummated all at once. Instead, the kingdom was inaugurated at Christ's first

47. John Calvin, commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:14, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), XX/1, 111, 116.

advent, and before the second advent there is an overlap of the ages—an already/not yet. But what is the nature of the "mystery" in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16?

In 1 Corinthians, the mystery "is the paradoxical event of the crucifixion: Christ, at the moment of his death, became the sovereign king."[48] In the immediately preceding context, Paul declares that "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1:18). That is what Paul is talking about in the paragraphs immediately preceding 2:6–16. Paul elaborates on his statement in 1:18 in the following verses:

> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly *of what we preach* to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but *we preach Christ crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1:21–25).

We see in these verses that what is foolish to unbelievers is the gospel message that Paul preaches—Christ crucified.

Then at the beginning of chapter 2, Paul declares: "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except *Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (2:1–2). This is the immediate context of 2:6–16, and this explains what Paul is talking about in 2:6–16. He is talking about the saving knowledge of God given through special revelation—in this case, the apostolic proclamation of Paul.

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48. Beale and Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed*, 110.

Another important aspect of Paul's teaching that is directly connected to his preaching of Christ crucified is his proclamation of the bodily resurrection of Christ. The crucified Christ who died is no longer dead. He is risen, and his tomb is empty. The same worldly wisdom that rejected the doctrine of a crucified Divine Messiah also rejected the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead. As we learn in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, the testimony that Paul delivered to the Corinthians is the message of the gospel, specifically the proclamation "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." It is a worldly wisdom that denies these specific things that Paul is opposing in this letter. In other words, he is opposing those whose "wisdom" leads them to reject the basic teachings of the gospel.

The entire focus of 1:18–2:5 is the gospel truth that Paul proclaimed to the church at Corinth and the way in which that Gospel was received by some and rejected as foolish by others.[49] Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God found in the message of Christ crucified and now bodily risen from the dead. Paul asserts that "The world did not know God through wisdom." What does this mean? Part of the explanation is found in these early chapters, and part of the answer is found in chapter 15. There, Paul explains that some of the Corinthians are saying there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). The same "some" who say this are the "some" who "have no knowledge of God" (15:34). Paul is not contradicting what he teaches in Romans 1. In Romans, Paul is speaking about the knowledge of God that comes through general revelation. Here, in 1 Corinthians, he is speaking of the specifically saving knowledge of God that comes through special revelation. Unbelievers have the kind of knowledge of God

49. James P. Ware, *The Final Triumph of God: Jesus, the Eyewitnesses, and the Resurrection of the Body in 1 Corinthians 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025), 41.

described in Romans 1. They do not have the *saving* knowledge of God described in 1 Corinthians 1–2 and 15.

The wisdom of the world rejects Paul's Gospel message of the crucified Divine Messiah and the bodily resurrection of this same Messiah. Therefore, "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1:21). The "secret and hidden wisdom of God" (2:7) is the message of the gospel that Paul summarizes in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. The rulers of this age, those who crucified Jesus, did not understand this gospel (2:8). God, however, has revealed this gospel to us through the Spirit (2:10). We have received the Spirit who searches and knows the depths of God in order that we might understand the things freely given us by God—namely, the gospel (2:10–12). Paul imparts this gospel "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (2:13). The natural person does not and cannot accept this saving knowledge found in the Gospel because it is "folly to him." He is not able to understand these things because they are spiritually discerned" (2:14). The spiritual man, on the other hand, has the mind of Christ and is able to understand the things of the Spirit, namely the gospel.

Paul's concern in this section of his letter is the gospel message he has declared to the Corinthians, a message some have received but others have rejected because they believe that a crucified Divine Messiah and bodily resurrection from the dead are foolish teachings. Paul clearly tells his readers that unbelievers have no understanding or knowledge of these things. He does not anywhere assert or imply that unbelievers have no true knowledge of anything. Gaffin is again conflating the saving knowledge found in the gospel with knowledge of all things, but he is doing so without any warrant in the text of Scripture itself. His interest in finding some biblical support for Van Til's epistemological holism causes him to take his eyes off of Paul's concern and read Van Til's concern into Paul. In other words, we do not find

anything like Van Til's epistemological holism in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 unless we put it there.

Gaffin's Argument: Part Three

1. Explication

In the final part of his article, Gaffin begins to work out the implications of his argument as it applies to Van Til. He observes:

> First Corinthians 1:17-3:22/4:21 is a significant apostolic *apologia*. In it come to expression specific convictions decisive for the matrix of thought that shapes Paul›s teaching as a whole and in every aspect; nowhere in the Pauline corpus are his basic concerns more on the line than here. This is the thought-matrix that captured Cornelius Van Til. These were his basic concerns too. No passage of Scripture, especially the closed circle of the Spirit's work in 2:10-16, has had a more determinative impact on his life and thought. In his time, in a singular and most resolute fashion, he contended for this and related truth.[50]

Given the fact that Van Til never published any exegesis of this passage of Scripture or discussed it at length in any of his writings, it is difficult to understand how Gaffin can claim that no passage of Scripture had a more determinative impact on Van Til's life and thought.

Be that as it may, according to Gaffin, Van Til devoted his life to battles on two fronts.

> [First, he fought] the mainstream of modern and contemporary theology flowing from the Enlightenment

50. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 30–31 (*WTJ*, 116).

> with its commitment to rational autonomy and "historical-critical" *Sachkritik* of Scripture [and then second, he fought] apologetics committed to the notion of a rationally grounded natural theology, with its essential tenets held in common by believer and unbeliever alike and serving as an adequate basis for convincing unbelievers of the distinctive truths of Christianity.[51]

Gaffin divides his observations on these ideas into three sections in the remainder of his article.

The Gospel and Human Wisdom[52]

First, with regard to the relationship between the gospel and non-Christian human wisdom, Gaffin explains, "Repeatedly, especially beginning with the Enlightenment, attempts have been made to accommodate the exercise of human reason as in some sense autonomous."[53] These attempts have failed, however, for one major reason.

> All such efforts, however, run aground on the immovable rock of Paul's unqualified *panta*. Every attempt to read our passage in partial terms or to restrict its scope by categorical distinctions, of whatever kind, clashes with the sweeping totality of Paul's vision. The antithesis in view leaves no room for an amicable division of territory or a neutral terrain. The wisdom of God is eschatological; it opposes *all* the wisdom of this age, *all* human wisdom according to the flesh (*kata sarka*/κατά σάρκα).[54]

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51. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 31 (*WTJ*, 116–17).

52. These subheadings have been removed in the revised version of the article found in the book *Revelation and Reason*.

53. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 32 (*WTJ*, 117).

54. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 32 (*WTJ*, 118).

Gaffin specifically has Kantianism in mind here, but his point would also apply to any who would distinguish the knowledge of created things such as rocks from the knowledge of God that can be known by means of an examination of God's general revelation through such created things and from the saving knowledge of God and the gospel that can be known only through God's special revelation.

The Unbeliever's Knowledge

Gaffin turns next to the issue of unbelieving knowledge. He understands that Van Til has been charged with being unclear. Van Til, he explains, is "often roundly denying that unbelievers have any true knowledge, but then sometimes suggesting that they do know."[55] Gaffin remarks:

> I make no effort to enter into this debate here in any full way. Nor do I want to suggest that Van Til has had the last word and could not have expressed himself any better. But I do propose that what he says, in its essence, about the unbeliever's knowledge, far from betraying a vitiating flaw in his thinking, points up a singular and important strength. Van Til, following Paul and the Reformers, does not deny the resourceful and valuable know-how unbelievers can display (building highways, decoding DNA, writing textbooks on logic, and much more, often better than believers). But, following Scripture with Calvin, and even more consistently than he, Van Til captures the equivocal tone of the Bible's, especially Paul's, assessment of the unbeliever's knowledge.[56]

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55. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 33 (*WTJ*, 118).

56. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 33 (*WTJ*, 119). It may be worth noting that the original article used the word "ambiguity" rather than "equivocal tone." I am not sure why Gaffin and/or the editors chose to replace "ambiguity" with the much stronger "equivocal tone," but the suggestion that Scripture speaks with an "equivocal tone" raises a host of important questions that Gaffin does not address.

In other words, Van Til speaks in an equivocal tone about the unbeliever's knowledge, or lack thereof, because the Bible itself speaks in an equivocal tone about this matter.

Gaffin then says, "The 'problem' begins with Scripture itself. In describing how and what the unbeliever knows, it does so in a deliberately ambiguous, paradoxical, 'dialectical' fashion, precisely and necessarily in order to make a crucial point unambiguously and powerfully plain."[57] Gaffin then appeals to Romans 1 in defense of this point:

> According to Rom 1:18ff., a passage Van Til is sometimes charged with downplaying or treating one-sidedly, unbelievers both know and are ignorant; they understand and do not understand, and they do so in the same *cognitive* moment. The knowledge of God, of "his eternal power and divine nature," in other words, who he is as the true and living God, is (a) clearly revealed in and around them, (b) made evident to them, and (c) understood by them (vv. 19–20). But this truth is suppressed or repressed (*katechontōn*/κατεχόντων, v. 18) such that their *thinking* is futile and their *uncomprehending* hearts darkened (v. 21).[58]

Gaffin asks with regard to Romans 1:18ff., "Where is the exegetical basis for finding a disjunction here between cognitive and more-than-cognitive knowledge?"[59]

After looking briefly at Ephesians 4:17–18, Gaffin concludes:

> All told, what Paul ascribes to unbelievers is "knowledgeable ignorance," "uncomprehending understanding." The

57. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 33–34 (*WTJ*, 119).

58. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 34 (*WTJ*, 119).

59. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 34 (*WTJ*, 119).

> unbeliever both knows and does not know, and there are no categories for neatly distinguishing the one from the other. This "dialectical" dilemma of the unbeliever is the genius of Paul's teaching.[60]

He further explains:

> However capable of better formulation, this analysis is not to be dismissed as self-contradictory nonsense. Unbelievers do know—they know God—and, within the parameters of unbelief, there are *no* categories or distinctions in terms of which that is *not* true; they know profoundly, that is, they know from the heart. But this knowledge in its actual possession and exercise, however otherwise effective, is ultimately always confused, inevitably unstable. To use Paul's language, it is in every respect fundamentally "futile"; it can serve no useful, constructive epistemological purpose, either in understanding God or, in that light (or better, that darkness), ourselves and the rest of the creation. Specifically and surely Paul would spare the church and have it never forget: such knowledge is not sound and adequate as a point of contact for bringing unbelievers even a step closer to accepting the truth of the gospel.[61]

Establishing this philosophy of knowledge is one of Paul's main goals in 1 Corinthians 2, according to Gaffin.

Gaffin adds some comments on common grace at this point. He says, "common grace, with its restraining effects, is not to be overlooked or minimized, and certainly deserves more attention

60. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 35 (*WTJ*, 120).

61. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 35–36 (*WTJ*, 120).

than I give it here."[62] Common grace does impact the effects of the antithesis, but it does not "moderate" the antithesis itself, and this, according to Gaffin, is a crucial distinction.[63] Gaffin explains: "common grace renders our present life in the world tolerable, even enjoyable, but does not bring unbelievers even one step closer to the new creation. Common grace, unlike special, gospel grace, is of 'this age'; it is not eschatological."[64]

Concluding this subsection of Part Three of his article, Gaffin appeals to Calvin. He writes:

> After all the many words on this issue, Calvin's word-picture is difficult to improve on: Unbelievers are like travelers on a pitch-black, moonless night, after a momentary lightning flash. For an instant the surrounding terrain has been illumined far and wide; but before they can take even one step, they are plunged back into darkness and left groping about aimlessly.[65]

Gaffin concludes: "This too, I take it, is the basic, controlling point that Van Til, in his day, was concerned to make about the knowledge of the unbeliever."[66]

Paul and Natural Theology

Gaffin concludes his article with some comments on natural theology. He writes:

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62. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 36 (*WTJ*, 121).

63. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 36–37 (*WTJ*, 121).

64. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 37 (*WTJ*, 121).

65. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 37 (*WTJ*, 121).

66. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 37 (*WTJ*, 122).

> The unbelievers in view in Romans 1:18ff. are those in view in 1 Corinthians 1:18ff.; though considered from different perspectives; they are not two different groups. Paul's scope in both passages is universal; the general considerations of each apply, collectively, to all unbelievers; the two passages supplement and reinforce each other.[67]

Gaffin then observes that the critique of presuppositionalism written by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Art Lindsley appeals to Romans 1:18ff. in its defense of natural theology, but he says the authors virtually ignore 1 Corinthians 2:6–16.[68] This is a problem because

> 1 Cor 2:6-16 (1:18-3:23) is the death blow to all natural theology. There is no knowledge of God resident in unbelievers or accessible to them that reduces the eschatological void that separates them from a saving knowledge of God. The failure to recognize that is sad, especially in the light of developments in theology and the church since the Reformation.[69]

After correctly acknowledging that the old "Calvin vs. the Calvinists" thesis is a "gross distortion" of history, Gaffin says it did contain a grain of truth because the "increasing preoccupation of orthodox dogmatics with natural theology, particularly after Descartes, worked to undermine itself and aided the rise of the very rationalism it was opposing."[70] He concludes:

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67. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 37 (*WTJ*, 122).

68. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 38 (*WTJ*, 122–23).

69. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 39 (*WTJ*, 123).

70. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 39 (*WTJ*, 123).

> By now, too, we should have learned that natural theology may have a place in Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies, with their semi-Pelagian anthropologies and qualified optimism about the unbeliever's capacity to know God, but not in a theology that would be Reformed.[71]

2. Evaluation

Regarding the main point that Gaffin makes in the subsection of Part Three titled "The Gospel and Human Wisdom," we have already seen that Scripture does distinguish between different kinds of knowledge. Scripture distinguishes among the knowledge of created things such as rocks, the knowledge of God that can be known by means of an examination of God's general revelation through such created things, and the saving knowledge of God and the gospel that can be known only through God's special revelation. Scripture not only expressly teaches that unbelievers have knowledge of created things such as rocks and the knowledge of God that can be known by means of an examination of God's general revelation through such created things, the very nature of Scripture as a verbal revelation requires that they know numerous things. The only way to find the modernist idea of epistemological holism in Scripture is to put it there. It can be found only if we are engaged in eisegesis rather than exegesis.

Regarding what Gaffin says in the subsection titled "The Unbeliever's Knowledge," the Bible can be said to speak in an equivocal tone about the unbeliever's knowledge only if we fail to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge as Scripture does. Once those different kinds of knowledge are recognized, the so-called ambiguity and equivocation that Gaffin attributes to the Holy Scriptures disappears. Gaffin finds equivocation and ambiguity in the Bible on this point only because he is reading

71. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 40 (*WTJ*, 124).

the Bible through the lenses of Van Til's false modernist epistemological theory. He is presupposing Van Tillian epistemology in his very attempt to provide exegetical support for Van Tillian epistemology, and it leads him to cast doubts on the perspicuity of Scripture.

Gaffin's exegesis of Romans 1 becomes confused because of the same conflation of different kinds of knowledge that he brought to Matthew 11, Luke 10, and 1 Corinthians 2. Romans 1 does not teach us that unbelievers are simultaneously knowing and ignorant in the way that Van Til and Gaffin say they are, a way that assumes the false modernist theory of epistemological holism. Unbelievers have a general knowledge of God. They know God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature." They have this knowledge of God because it has been "clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." Thus, unbelievers are without excuse (Rom. 1:20). Unbelievers cannot be without excuse unless they have this knowledge of God.

However, unbelievers also suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18). For "*although they knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). It is not that they lost the knowledge of God they had (and all other knowledge for that matter). The problem is the way they respond to the knowledge of God they have. Rather than responding appropriately by honoring God and giving thanks to God, they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:21–23). In other words, they worshipped the creature rather than the Creator and became idolators. According to Scripture, idols have eyes but do not see, and they have ears but do not hear (Psalm 115:5–6). This is how unbelievers became "fools," because as Scripture indicates, we become like what we worship (Psalm 115:8; cf. Isa. 44:18). This is why unbelievers have eyes

but cannot see and ears but cannot hear. The unbeliever is like a married man who commits adultery. This person knows he is married, but he suppresses that knowledge in his unrighteous desires. He lets his lust drown out what he knows is true, and he lets his lust lead him into doing what he knows is wrong.

Regarding common grace and its relation to the antithesis, it is true that common grace is only for this age and that it is non-salvific, but it is also important to note that, according to Van Til, the absolute antithesis exists in this age only in principle. The absolute antithesis exists in practice only after the final separation of the sheep and the goats.[72] In the present age, the antithesis is qualified in practice and unbelievers do have knowledge of many things as a result. This is important because apologetics are only done during the present age. There is no need for apologetics after the separation of the sheep from the goats. According to Van Til, the antithesis in the present age is qualified in practice. It is only absolute in principle. A qualified antithesis, however, does not have the same apologetic implications as an absolute antithesis. If in practice, unbelievers do have all kinds of knowledge, then unbelievers and believers have that knowledge in common. If in practice, unbelievers do have all kinds of knowledge, then in practice, apologetics has to take that fact into consideration.

Gaffin quotes Calvin with approval near the end of the second subsection of Part Three. He cites Calvin's words as follows: "Unbelievers are like travelers on a pitch-black, moonless night, after a momentary lightning flash. For an instant the surrounding terrain has been illumined far and wide; but before they can take even one step, they are plunged back into darkness and left groping about aimlessly."[73] Gaffin leads the reader to believe

72. Cornelius Van Til, 'Common Grace: Third Article,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 9, no. 1 (Nov. 1946): 57, 74.

73. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 37 (*WTJ*, 121).

that this is Calvin's view of all unbelieving knowledge in general. He implies that Calvin shares his own and Van Til's modernist theory of epistemological holism. However, if we look at Calvin's comment in its original context, we see that Calvin is actually teaching precisely the view that Van Til and Gaffin reject.

Calvin's illustration is taken from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This illustration is found near the end of a long discussion of what unbelievers can know by using their reason, and in this discussion Calvin distinguishes between their knowledge of "earthly things" and their knowledge of "heavenly things." Calvin begins this discourse by asserting "that man's natural gifts were corrupted by sin, and his supernatural gifts withdrawn; meaning by supernatural gifts the light of faith and righteousness, which would have been sufficient for the attainment of heavenly life and everlasting felicity" (II.2.12).[74] He continues:

> Man, when he withdrew his allegiance to God, was deprived of the spiritual gifts by which he had been raised to the hope of eternal salvation. Hence it follows, that he is now an exile from the kingdom of God, so that all things which pertain to the blessed life of the soul are extinguished in him until he recover them by the grace of regeneration. Among these are faith, love to God, charity towards our neighbour, the study of righteousness and holiness. All these, when restored to us by Christ, are to be regarded as adventitious and above nature. If so, we infer that they were previously abolished. (II.2.12)

In short, Calvin is affirming total depravity. He elaborates by saying:

74. All quotations are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008).

> On the other hand, soundness of mind and integrity of heart were, at the same time, withdrawn, and it is this which constitutes the corruption of natural gifts. For although there is still some residue of intelligence and judgment as well as will, we cannot call a mind sound and entire which is both weak and immersed in darkness. As to the will, its depravity is but too well known. (II.2.12)

In short, our rational and volitional faculties have been weakened and corrupted by the fall. There is a noetic and volitional effect of sin on man.

Human reason, however, was not entirely destroyed, Calvin says. There are "still some sparks which show that he is a rational animal, and differs from the brutes, inasmuch as he is endued with intelligence, and yet, that this light is so smothered by clouds of darkness that it cannot shine forth to any good effect" (II.2.12). Having established these basic points, Calvin proceeds to move to a discussion of the power of the intellect. He says, "To charge the intellect with perpetual blindness, so as to leave it no intelligence of any description whatever, is repugnant not only to the Word of God, but to common experience" (II.2.12). He continues:

> We see that there has been implanted in the human mind a certain desire of investigating truth, to which it never would aspire unless some relish for truth antecedently existed. There is, therefore, now, in the human mind, discernment to this extent, that it is naturally influenced by the love of truth, the neglect of which in the lower animals is a proof of their gross and irrational nature. Still it is true that this love of truth fails before it reaches the goal, forthwith falling away into vanity. (II.2.12)

Were this all that Calvin said, one might conclude that Van Til and Gaffin are on the right track when they argue that fallen

human beings cannot achieve knowledge of anything through the use of reason. Calvin, however, is more nuanced in his thinking. He draws an important distinction that Van Til and Gaffin tend to ignore when appealing to him in support of their theory of epistemology. Calvin says this:

> Still, however, man's efforts are not always so utterly fruitless as not to lead to some result, especially when his attention is directed to *inferior objects*. Nay, even with regard to *superior objects*, though he is more careless in investigating them, he makes some little progress. Here, however, his ability is more limited, and he is never made more sensible of his weakness than when he attempts to soar above the sphere of the present life. It may therefore be proper, in order to make it more manifest how far our ability extends in regard to these two classes of objects, to draw a distinction between them. The distinction is, that *we have one kind of intelligence of earthly things, and another of heavenly things*. (II.2.13)

This distinction between knowledge of earthly things and knowledge of heavenly things is crucial for understanding what Calvin teaches regarding the knowledge of unbelievers, and it is crucial for understanding why the words Gaffin quotes in his article do not support his thesis. As we will see, Calvin says that unbelievers can and do have all kinds of knowledge of earthly things, but with regards to most kinds of heavenly things they are blind. This is precisely the kind of biblical distinction that Gaffin's article is at pains to deny.

Calvin next provides his readers with a definition of "earthly things" and "heavenly things." He says:

> By earthly things, I mean those which relate not to God and his kingdom, to true righteousness and future blessedness, but have some connection with the present life, and are in a

> manner confined within its boundaries. By heavenly things, I mean the pure knowledge of God, the method of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom. (II.2.13)

He elaborates by adding: "To the former belong matters of policy and economy, all mechanical arts and liberal studies. To the latter (as to which, see the eighteenth and following sections) belong the knowledge of God and of his will, and the means of framing the life in accordance with them" (II.2.13). Calvin enumerates some of the "earthly things" of which fallen man has knowledge and concludes that "this is ample proof, that, in regard to the constitution of the present life, no man is devoid of the light of reason" (II.2.13).

In II.2.14, Calvin describes the manual and liberal arts about which unbelievers have much knowledge. He argues that we should give thanks to God for these gifts given to all men. He then explains, "Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator" (II.2.15). He affirms that all truth is God's truth, saying, "If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts, we insult the Giver" (II.2.15). Calvin then provides examples of such knowledge, mentioning the ancient lawgivers, the philosophers, the logicians, the physicians, and the mathematicians. In short, unbelievers have knowledge of all kinds of earthly things. Calvin concludes: "Therefore, since it is manifest that men whom the Scriptures term carnal, are so acute and clear-sighted in the investigation of inferior things, their example should teach us how many gifts the Lord has left in possession of human nature, notwithstanding of its having been

despoiled of the true good" (II.2.15). In other words, although we must affirm the noetic effect of sin, that effect is not what Van Til and Gaffin say it is.

Calvin then tells his readers, "if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it, lest, by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth" (II.2.16). There would be no need for Christians to learn from unbelievers if unbelievers have no true knowledge of anything. Calvin then adds an important reminder. He explains that even though unbelievers have much knowledge of earthly things, that knowledge is ultimately fleeting and vain when not joined by true knowledge of God.

Calvin writes next: "The sum of the whole is this: From a general survey of the human race, it appears that one of the essential properties of our nature is reason, which distinguishes us from the lower animals, just as these by means of sense are distinguished from inanimate objects" (II.2.17). He adds: "Had God not so spared us, our revolt would have carried along with it the entire destruction of nature." The point is that God did not completely destroy our nature, including our rational faculties, and therefore fallen man is able to come to the knowledge of many kinds of earthly things.

In the final section of this discourse, Calvin turns to the knowledge of heavenly things. He writes:

> We must now explain what the power of human reason is, in regard to the kingdom of God, and spiritual discernments which consists chiefly of three things—the knowledge of God, the knowledge of his paternal favour towards us, which constitutes our salvation, and the method of regulating of our conduct in accordance with the Divine Law. (II.2.18)

Here we find Calvin's famous comment: "With regard to the former two, but more properly the second, men otherwise the most ingenious are blinder than moles." So, if we summarize what he has said thus far, it is that fallen man can and does have knowledge of many earthly things, but with regard to the first two kinds of heavenly things, he is blinder than a mole.

With regard to fallen man's knowledge of heavenly things, Calvin says, "the Lord has bestowed on them some slight perception of his Godhead that they might not plead ignorance as an excuse for their impiety, and has, at times, instigated them to deliver some truths, the confession of which should be their own condemnation" (II.2.18). This limited knowledge of God, however, did not lead them to the truth. Here is where we find the comment that Gaffin cites in his article. Here in his discussion of fallen man's knowledge of *heavenly things*, Calvin says:

> Their discernment was not such as to direct them to the truth, far less to enable them to attain it, but resembled that of the bewildered traveller, who sees the flash of lightning glance far and wide for a moment, and then vanish into the darkness of the night, before he can advance a single step. So far is such assistance from enabling him to find the right path. (II.2.18)

That which Calvin applies specifically to fallen man's knowledge of heavenly things as opposed to earthly things, Gaffin applies to fallen man's knowledge of all things. That which Calvin distinguishes, heavenly things and earthly things, Gaffin conflates. In short, not only does Gaffin read Van Til into Scripture, but he also reads Van Til into Calvin.

In the third subsection of Part Three of his article titled "Paul and Natural Theology," Gaffin acknowledges the falsity of the old "Calvin vs. the Calvinists" thesis, but he creates unnecessary confusion when he says that it still contains a grain of truth. He

says, "The increasing preoccupation of orthodox dogmatics with natural theology, particularly after Descartes, worked to undermine that orthodoxy and aided the rise of the very rationalism it was opposing."[75] The problem is that Cartesianism and rationalism only became an issue in the middle of the seventeenth century. There is a transitional period in the latter half of the 17th century as rationalism began to make inroads into theology, but the theology of Reformed orthodoxy had existed well over a century prior to that transitional period. The Reformed orthodox theologians of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century taught natural theology before natural theology was distorted by the effects of later seventeenth century and eighteenth century rationalism.

Gaffin laments the fact that some do not realize that 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 is a death blow to all natural theology. As we saw above, he says, "The failure to recognized that is sad, especially in the light of developments in theology and the church since the Reformation." This statement is strange given the fact that all of the orthodox Reformed theologians of the 16th and much of the seventeenth century affirmed a non-rationalistic natural theology. They taught that man can and does come to some knowledge of God through the use of reason in the examination of the created world. And those who addressed the question offered numerous proofs for the existence of God that moved from knowledge of the created world to the existence of the Creator. That was the view of the men who wrote the Reformed confessions.

Conclusion

John Calvin and the Reformed orthodox theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries faithfully taught the theology of Jesus and Paul. Among other things, they taught a fully

75. Gaffin, *Revelation and Reason*, 39 (*WTJ*, 123).

biblical doctrine of total depravity, and they taught a biblically nuanced doctrine of the noetic effects of sin. When discussing the knowledge of unbelievers, they carefully distinguished between the knowledge of created things (such as rocks and trees), the knowledge of God that can be known by means of an examination of God's general revelation through such created things, and the saving knowledge of God and the gospel that can be known only through God's special revelation. This is why these early Reformed theologians all incorporated a biblically informed, non-rationalistic natural theology into their systems of thought and into the Reformed confessions. Their biblical understanding of total depravity enabled them to correctly understand the unbeliever's problem, and because they correctly diagnosed the unbeliever's problem, Calvin and the Reformed orthodox theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proclaimed and defended the gospel in a way that sparked the Reformation.

When Van Til made the claim that the Reformed theologians in the generation after Calvin reintroduced synthesis thinking into Reformed theology and thereby compromised every major doctrine of Scripture, he threw the gauntlet down. He effectively forced Reformed Christians to decide who defines what it means to be Reformed: the men who wrote the Reformed confessions or Van Til. Many chose Van Til, but many also realized that Van Til had not provided a secure exegetical foundation for his dogmatic claims. Richard Gaffin is one of those who has attempted to provide the missing exegetical foundation.

Although some have failed to detect any fundamental flaws in Gaffin's article on 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, it has several. First and most significantly, rather than finding exegetical support for Van Til's key epistemological emphases in the biblical text, Gaffin interprets the biblical text through the already assumed lenses of Van Til's key epistemological emphases. Gaffin's article assumes from the beginning the conclusion he sets out to prove. He assumes the truth of Van Til's modernist epistemology from

the outset. Thus, the entire article is a long example of begging the question.

This question begging assumption causes Gaffin to seriously distort the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the Apostle Paul, and (less importantly) of Calvin. Neither Jesus nor Paul (nor Calvin, for that matter) teach the false modernist theory of epistemological holism. None of them teach the idea that special revelation and regeneration are required in order for any human knowledge to exist. Artificially forcing epistemological holism into the teachings of Jesus and Paul causes us to miss the actual important and amazing points they are making about the gospel. Epistemological holism is an unbiblical epistemology and thus should not be used by Christians as a lens through which we interpret the Word of God.