

Cornelius
VAN TIL

AMERICAN REFORMED BIOGRAPHIES

D. G. HART AND SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS

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Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman

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VAN TIL

Reformed Apologist and Churchman

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To Kathy

Steadfast, Unmovable, and Abounding

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Series Preface



All history is biography,” Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked. Emerson’s aphorism still contains a good deal of truth. History is the memory and record of past human lives, thus making biography the most basic form of historical knowledge. To understand any event, period, or text from the past, some acquaintance with specific persons is crucial.

The popularity of biography among contemporary book buyers in America supports this insight. Recent biographies of John Adams and Ben Franklin have encouraged many—who fear for America’s historical amnesia—to believe that a keen and formidable interest in history still exists among the nation’s reading public. To be sure, the source of this interest could be the stature and influence of the subjects themselves—the founding fathers of the United States. Still, the accessibility of biography—its concrete subject matter, intimate scope, and obvious relevance—suggests that the reason for the recent success of these biographies is in the genre of writing itself.

American Reformed Biographies, coedited by D. G. Hart and Sean Michael Lucas, seeks to nurture this general interest in biography as a way of learning about and from the past. The titles in this series feature American Reformed leaders who were important representatives or interpreters of Reformed Christianity in the United States and who continue to be influential through writings and arguments still pertinent

to the self-understanding of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians, pastors, and church members. The aim is to provide learned treatments of men and women that will be accessible to readers from a wide variety of backgrounds—biography that is both sufficiently scholarly to be of service to academics and those with proficiency in American church history and adequately accessible to engage the nonspecialist. Consequently, these books are more introductory than definitive, with the aim of giving an overview of a figure's thought and contribution, along with suggestions for further study.

The editors have sought authors who are sympathetic to Reformed Christianity and to their subjects, who regard biography not merely as a celebration of past accomplishments but also as a chance to ask difficult questions of both the past and the present in order to gain greater insight into Christian faith and practice. As such, *American Reformed Biographies* is designed to make available the best kind of historical writing—one that yields both knowledge and wisdom.

Acknowledgments



*W*hen Cornelius Van Til delivered a lecture on Boston Personalism before the faculty of the Boston University School of Theology, on March 6, 1956, he began with characteristic modesty. “I would have indeed been happier,” he said, “if you had invited me to listen to you instead of to speak to you. But, in a sense, I have already listened to you a good deal. I have listened to you by reading the great books of your truly great men.”¹

It is a daunting task to expect readers to listen to me on the life of Cornelius Van Til, and so I too must begin on Van Til’s note of gratitude. It has been my privilege over the past several years to study the life and teachings of this truly great man. I met Cornelius Van Til on only a handful of occasions, but it seems that I have lived with him for all my life. As a baptized member of Franklin Square Orthodox Presbyterian Church (New York), I sat under the ministry of Van Til’s students. My first pastor, Elmer Dortzbach (who earned his BD from Westminster Seminary in 1959), claimed that Van Til brought him “kicking and screaming” into the “delightful rigors” of the Reformed faith. He remembered being “devastated before the Scriptures as [they were] so beautifully and consistently proclaimed” in Van Til’s classroom.² Likewise, my second pastor, John C. Hills (ThB, Westminster, 1941), who followed Dortzbach at Franklin Square, faithfully preached the self-attesting Christ of the Scripture for twenty-two years. Van Til

continued to influence my life and thinking during my undergraduate studies with T. Grady Spires and at Westminster Seminary under John Frame, Richard Gaffin, Meredith Kline, Robert Strimple, and many others. I am grateful for the influence of these faithful pastors, teachers, and friends in my understanding of Van Til's work.

What emerges in this biography is a focus on Van Til the Orthodox Presbyterian, with the modifier in uppercase. Often neglected in the many evaluations of Van Til's thought is attention to his ecclesiastical life. A study of Van Til's Reformed apologetics apart from his Reformed ecclesiology risks a reduction of his work merely to the classroom. By tracing his labors as a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, this book is written with the hope of contributing to Van Til's legacy both to his denomination and to the universal church.

My debt to many friends is great. I am thankful to the trustees of Reformed Theological Seminary for granting me a sabbatical in the fall of 2004, when I conducted much of the research for this book (while distracted by a busy hurricane season). The editors of the series, Darryl Hart and Sean Lucas, were encouraging in their confidence that I could pull this off and patient when it appeared that I might not. Of course, I knew to rely on librarians, and many came through for me, including Harry Boonstra and Paul Fields at Calvin Seminary, Wayne Sparkman at the PCA Historical Center, Alan Strange at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, and especially Grace Mullen of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. Grace not only navigated me expertly through the Van Til archives at Westminster Seminary; she also fact-checked (often off the top of her head) so many details in this story that I was often left wondering why she hadn't written this book.

I am also eager to document my gratitude to my predecessor as historian of the OPC, Charles G. Dennison. Charlie's interviews with many Orthodox Presbyterian pastors turned up some wonderful episodes of Van Til's life and ministry. More importantly, Charlie modeled for me and many others the importance of history for the life and health of a Reformed denomination. His insight into Van Til's role in shaping the OPC's identity is echoed throughout this book.

My library colleagues at the Orlando campus of Reformed Theological Seminary, Michael Farrell, Keely Leim, and Karen Mid-

dlesworth, were gracious and efficient during my periodic absence and absentmindedness throughout the course of this project. Simon Kistemaker kindly translated for me several of Van Til's Dutch letters and articles.

Family and friends of Van Til's provided stories, letters, and hospitality during my visits, including Thelma Van Til (daughter-in-law), Case Van Til (nephew), Reinder Van Til (Henry Van Til's son and Cornelius's grand-nephew), and two children of John J. DeWaard, Leona DeWaard Klooster and John R. DeWaard. I must also express my thanks to Reinder Van Til for sharing his family's collection of letters between Uncle Kees and his nephews Henry and Nick Van Til. Often those letters found Van Til expressing himself in a most candid and intimate way.

Though not technically family, Bob den Dulk offered his memories of Oome Kees, and Robert Cara related his family connection to a grade-school teacher of Van Til's. Several friends and associates who are far more gifted in Reformed apologetics willingly served as conversation partners, including William Dennison, William Edgar, John Frame, Richard Gaffin, Scott Oliphint, and Lane Tipton. All of them encouraged me in fruitful directions and gently redirected me when I strayed. Thanks to readers of the manuscript who offered helpful suggestions: George Harinck, Stephen Oharek, Danny Olinger, Jack Sawyer, and David VanDrunen; and special thanks to my research assistant Laurence O'Donnell.

To paraphrase Abraham Kuyper, there was not one square inch of our home that this project did not claim as its own. My children and especially my wife patiently endured the domestic disorder that the book generated. I am glad to acknowledge Kathy's faithful encouragement in a small way by dedicating the book to her.

Introduction: Apologist and Churchman



*W*hile he was alive, it was often observed that Cornelius Van Til's readers could be divided into those who did not agree with him and those who did not understand him. Little seems to have improved in the twenty years that have passed since his death in 1987. Debates over Van Til's teaching have divided his followers, who have created competing versions of the Reformed apologist. There are Van Tilians among mainline Protestants and fundamentalist Baptists; they are found both within his denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), and without. However, what his students often overlook is that to separate Van Til the apologist from Van Til the churchman is to eclipse the very heart and underlying simplicity of his thought and life. Thus, many of his followers are searching for Van Til's significance apart from the context in which he served.

Van Til's theological commitments cannot be understood apart from his ecclesiology. The faith that Van Til sought to defend was the faith of Reformed churches that found expression in Reformed creeds. His apologetic was self-consciously ecclesiastical as much as theological. "Van Til," Charles Dennison once wrote, "was nothing if he was not a faithful churchman."¹

Failure to understand Van Til's thought in its ecclesial context is seen not only in his opponents, but also in his followers. Some of them have made extravagant claims about Van Til and his legacy that would have embarrassed him. Disciples have lauded him as the most creative mind since Immanuel Kant and the greatest Christian thinker since John Calvin. The allegedly innovative features of his apologetic approach have been applauded for their proto-postmodernism and either credited or blamed for distancing both Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church from their American Presbyterian past. Yet, Van Til's ecclesiology is among the least explored features of his work, and for that reason many tend to overlook important episodes in his life and to misinterpret others.

Van Til's influence, to be sure, extends far beyond the church that he helped to establish and served for so long. Indeed, the universe of Van Tilians exceeds the modest membership of the OPC. Partly for this reason, interpreters tend to characterize Van Til's ecclesial interests as idiosyncratic, avocational, and even tangential to his supposedly more important apologetic insights. Absent an appreciation for Van Til's passion for the church, for example, some have struggled to understand how such an avowed evidentialist like J. Gresham Machen could hire a presuppositionalist like Van Til for Westminster Seminary. And a disregard for church politics during the early years of the OPC reduces Van Til's dispute with Gordon Clark to an embarrassing footnote in his career. These events, rather than being analyzed abstractly, ought to be understood within the context of Van Til's love for the church.

While not ignoring his teachings, this biography focuses on Van Til's ecclesiastical life more than on other interpretations or aspects of his career. This emphasis may appear surprising in an age of academic specialization where an ever-widening gap stands between the pulpit and the classroom. But Van Til's life demands that we reunite these generally unconnected worlds; for he is constantly found serving, teaching, and preaching from within this very gap.

Curiously, the failure to appreciate Van Til's churchmanship is often found among many who criticize him for the seemingly abstract character of his work. A common impression found in assessments of Van Til is that his focus in the ivory tower of apologetic methodol-

ogy left him distant from the actual practice of apologetics. In truth, Reformed apologetics drove him to the pulpits of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, to General Assembly study committees, to hospital beds, and even to New York City street corners. Critics who score Van Til for his alleged obsession with methodology may be most guilty of overlooking his passionate and practical churchmanship. Van Til's desire to strengthen the faithfulness of the people of God was no mere academic exercise, and his involvement in the church marked significant chapters in Orthodox Presbyterian history. Many who claim to be Van Til's heirs, as well as his critics, would do well to imitate his sensibilities as a Presbyterian churchman.

This book may also surprise readers who might have expected a deeper analysis of Van Til's apologetic approach. As useful as such studies may be,² I am persuaded that a proper assessment of Van Til's life and work yields an appreciation for the underlying simplicity of his teaching. This simplicity is found in his singular passion for proclaiming the glory of God from within the context of the Reformed faith.

In his own words, Van Til spent his lifetime attempting to raise the banner of the Reformed faith on the highest mountain. He referred to his system unpretentiously as "Reformed apologetics." Simply put, Van Til devoted himself to the insistence that only a Reformed apologetic could properly defend and propagate the Reformed faith. Anything less than a fully Reformed defense for the Reformed faith rendered the theology of the church unequally yoked.

This simple claim, of course, had profound consequences. It meant that a Reformed engagement with the world had to account for the epistemological self-consciousness of modern unbelief. It required a careful negotiation between guarding the antithesis and recognizing the elements of common grace in the expressions of unbelief. Unbelievers, Van Til was willing to concede, were capable of genuine good, but only to the extent that they were living on borrowed capital and thus without epistemological justification for their good accomplishments.

The Reformed character of Van Til's apologetics also shaped his understanding of the knowledge of the believer. The ontological gulf between God and humanity removed any epistemological equality between them. This Creator-creature distinction, foundational to all

that Van Til wrote, protected the incomprehensibility of God. So the believer follows God's thoughts after him in a true, yet analogical fashion.

The close connection that Van Til maintained between apologetics and Reformed theology demands that the reader see his apologetic work in its ecclesial context. Van Til's commitment to the whole counsel of God as understood through the Reformed confessional hermeneutic provoked a relentless consistency in the way he went about his work. He desired to find the best defense of the faith, and that goal required the diligent and often polemical work of identifying inconsistency and exposing errors in both believing and unbelieving thought. Yet, what fueled his polemics was not a penchant for vain argumentation but a passion for the purity of the church.

Van Til's passion for the church also meant that Reformed apologetics served to shape the identity and direction of the church. Through his life and work Van Til directed the church into a deeper appreciation for the Reformed faith. Calvin's theocentricity, Vos's biblical insights, Kuyper's antithesis, Machen's confessional consciousness—all of these influences came to bear upon Van Til's Reformed apologetics. Specifically, the Reformed faith produced in the pen of Van Til a Reformed militance that characterized Westminster Seminary and the OPC during his nearly half-century teaching career.

Without the ecclesial context of Van Til's passion, his content becomes confused and even anemic. If Van Til considered it schizophrenic to establish Reformed theology on a non-Reformed apologetic, the situation today, twenty years after his passing, may be reversed. Van Tilian apologetics are often employed by apologists who are less than fully committed to what he would have regarded as a full-orbed Calvinism. In this way today's church is expressing another form of incoherence: a Reformed apologetic is servicing a theology that is more generically Protestant. This de-contextualization eclipses the Reformed distinctiveness at the heart of Van Til's system.

In a less than full-orbed Calvinism, the antithesis is not on display, the confession is not worn on the sleeves, and the banner of the Reformed faith is not raised as high as it should be. An apologetic system that does not reinforce a militantly Reformed ecclesiology will

find only superficial similarities to Van Til's thought. A cut-and-paste approach to Van Til that promotes an "evangelical Van Tilianism" is an abstraction that fails to measure up to the deepest concerns of his work.

The present work is the second attempt to write a full-length biography of Cornelius Van Til. In 1979, Thomas Nelson published William White's warm personal memoir, *Van Til, Defender of the Faith*. In his review of White's biography, John Frame faulted the book for saying "very little about the main developments in Van Til's thought and life after 1945."³ Frame is right, but his observation underscores the apparent dilemma for Van Til's biographer. By 1945, when Van Til turned fifty, much of his life was settled. His classroom syllabi were mostly written (at least in early editions). In that same decade he experienced his two major skirmishes with Karl Barth and Gordon Clark, episodes that have largely shaped the popular impression of his work. By this time his habits of work, church, and family life were firmly established, and the main contours of his theological system developed. Indeed, after Van Til joined the faculty of Westminster Seminary in 1929, he never switched vocations, nor did he serve another employer, and he did not change his mind. In short, the last few decades of his life may appear stagnant and uneventful.

Still, there is a story to tell that I trust will engage and challenge the reader. In the last thirty years of his life, Van Til was embroiled in plenty of controversies, which were not mere footnotes to his earlier energetic life. Moreover, the seemingly unremarkable steadiness of Van Til's later years is important for the light it sheds on other stories that engaged him intimately. For example, the schools and churches that he joined (Westminster Seminary and the OPC) and left (Princeton Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church) were shaped either from his influence or from the ways they fell under his critical scrutiny. Furthermore, his work bears on larger developments in Protestant theology, such as the American reception of Barthianism and the development of the evangelical movement.

More importantly, throughout all the years of his life's work Van Til modeled a way of being faithfully Reformed and fully American. Amid

a culture of unbelief he embodied a distinctively Reformed spirituality that bears pondering for the church today. As Christians continue to confront the challenge of unbelief in our age, we would do well to examine the ways in which Van Til taught the church of his day to meet that challenge in the previous century. If Reformed apologetics required Van Til's entire life and complete devotion then, we cannot expect it to demand any less of us now.