Dr. Cornelius Van Til

The centennial of his birth

Both Dr. Cornelius (Kees) Van Til and his wife, Rena Klooster, were born in 1895 — he in May and she in October. On the occasion of the Van Tils’ eightieth birthday(s), the editor of this journal asked me to write an article to commemorate that event (Torch and Trumpet, Oct. 1975, pp. 19-21). In response to the request of the current editors, I agreed to revise and update that article for the centennial commemoration. Since I am a nephew of the Van Tils, "the reader should realize," as I wrote in 1975, "that objectivity is never possible, least of all among relatives."

Cornelius Van Til was born on May 3, 1895 in the village of Grootegast in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands. The first volume of Herman Bavinck's Reformed dogmatics (Gereformeerde Dogmatiek) was published that year. Abraham Kuyper's powerful Reformed theology and kingdom perspectives were impacting the Netherlands and beyond. The Free University, founded by Kuyper and the "common people" (kleine luiden), was moving forward. Gerhardus Vos had declined Kuyper's invitation to teach at the Free University; after teaching at Calvin Seminary for five years, Vos was already in his second year of teaching "Biblical Theology" at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1895.

Kees Van Til, the sixth of eight sons, spent the first ten years of his life in the Netherlands where his father farmed. In 1905, the year in which the sixty-eight year old Abraham Kuyper lost the election and the office of prime minister, the Van Til family immigrated to the United States and settled on a farm in northern Indiana, the Munster-Highland area. The family joined the Christian Reformed Church and helped to establish a local Christian school. Although Kees enjoyed farming (gardening remained his hobby), he felt called to prepare for the ministry of the gospel. High school and college costs were difficult to meet for a large farming family. Eventually Kees was able to enroll at Calvin College in a program that included both a "prep school" and regular college courses. He graduated from Calvin with an A.B. degree in 1922 at the age of 27.

The year 1922 was a difficult one at Calvin Seminary because of the "Jansen case." A number of Christian Reformed students, including Van Til, his close friend (and eventually my father-in-law) John de Waard, as well as Dave Bonnema and Richard Frens decided to study at Princeton Seminary which was still considered a stronghold of Reformed orthodoxy in the line of the Hodges and Warfield. Besides, Gerhardus Vos was still teaching there and he attracted Christian Reformed students with his courses in the area of "Biblical Theology." Gerhardus Vos made a lasting impression on Van Til. A picture of Vos graced his study. He and de Waard were present at the burial of Gerhardus Vos in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania in. 1949.

In 1924 Van Til received the Th.B. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary as well as the M.A. degree from Princeton University. The following year he was awarded a Th.M degree in Systematic Theology. During those years at Princeton Van Til had good relations with Professor Wm. Brenton Greene, Jr. who taught apologetics; he also appreciated J. Gresham Machen who was teaching New Testament subjects there. He received the doctoral degree in 1927 after the defense of his dissertation on "God and the Absolute." In the fall of 1925 Kees married his longtime girl friend from Munster, Rena Klooster. Since Rena was my father's oldest sister, that marriage made Kees Van Til my uncle before my second birthday. Together now, "Kees and Rena" (as I heard their names long before I was able to identify them) returned to Princeton to complete his Ph.D. program in philosophical studies.
At the age of thirty-two, and armed with a prestigious Ph.D. from Princeton University, Dr. Cornelius Van Til was called and ordained in 1927 as the pastor of the small Christian Reformed Church of Spring Lake, Michigan. By then trouble was brewing at Princeton as modernism was making inroads. Dr. J. Gresham Machen was elected by Princeton's Board to be Professor of Apologetics to succeed Dr. Greene. But the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., under President J. Ross Stevenson's urging, did not confirm Dr. Machen's appointment. In that context Dr. Van Til was offered a one-year appointment as Instructor in Apologetics in place of his former professor, Dr. W.B. Greene, Jr. Reluctantly Van Til asked for a one-year leave of absence from his Spring Lake congregation and went to Princeton in the fall of 1928 — a move that was to change the course of his life and tie him in with Machen's history. In the spring of 1929 Princeton was reorganized so that modernists were in control. Although Van Til was offered a regular professorship after his one-year term as instructor, he declined the appointment and returned to his Spring Lake congregation at the end of the 1928-29 academic year.

He was not to remain long in the Spring Lake parsonage, however. Under the leadership of Dr. Machen, a new seminary was being organized to carry on the historic Reformed position of old Princeton. Dr. Van Til, as well as two other Christian Reformed men, Rev. R.B. Kuiper and Dr. Ned B. Stonehouse were invited to join the original faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. C. Van Til began his work as Professor of Apologetics at Westminster in September 1929. Although his love for the Christian Reformed Church never waned, his life work was teaching at Westminster. On at least two occasions, 1943 and 1952, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church offered him an appointment to teach systematic theology and other courses at Calvin Seminary. In 1952 he did teach contemporary theology at Calvin for a semester. He was a fraternal delegate from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on several occasions and as late as 1959 expressed the hope for union between the two churches. Yet Westminster Seminary represented a cause which he could not abandon. He officially retired at the end of the 1972 school year while continuing to serve as a part-time lecturer for several years. His life was intimately bound up with the history of Westminster Theological Seminary where he was known as an outstanding leader and a "defender of the faith."

Dr. Van Til came to be known especially for his efforts to develop a consistently Reformed apologetics. He was thoroughly grounded in the Reformed theology of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck and Gerhardus Vos. He gradually came to see that the apologetics of the Hodges, Warfield and Greene involved a synthesis with Scottish realism and other forms of non-Christian thought. A reformation of apologetics was needed to break away from every form of a nature-grace dichotomy. Every thought, also in apologetics, must be conformed to Christ. This has been Van Til's major contribution in attempting to develop a consistently Reformed apologetic for the defense of the Christian faith.

Van Til argued that the defense of the Christian faith cannot proceed from a neutral or a rationalistic type of apologetic; it must proceed from the presuppositions of the Christian faith itself. In this project Van Til was helped by and allied with his Dutch contemporaries, Professors Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd although their relations were not without later tensions. Van Til's attention was primarily focused on apologetics and the defense of the faith. In that role he was unique; he was indeed the "prince of twentieth century Christian apologists," as Meredith Kline of Gordon-Conwell Divinity School described him. Even today, especially in the Evangelical world, debates concerning apologetics tend to be related to Van Tillian positions. His influence on his students and on the Reformed/Evangelical world, has been profound.

Cornelius was a controversial figure during his academic lifetime and remains so even today. His handsome, white haired and goateed father lived his retirement years near the state line between Indiana and Illinois. That state line between Munster, Indiana and Lansing, Illinois is a very straight line. Kees always tried to draw straight lines, especially when dealing with theology and apologetics. The line between truth and error, between Christianity and non-Christianity, between Reformed and non-Reformed, he insisted, is a straight line. In such matters there is no room for compromise. With his penetrating intellect Van Til, like Machen, became a sharp critic of modernism as well as of Roman Catholicism, Arminianism and Neo-orthodoxy. In his first major publication in 1946 he labeled the theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner The New Modernism. In
his battles for the uncompromised truth, Van Til sometimes found it necessary to criticize Reformed colleagues whom he judged to be following dangerous routes. That included friends like G.C. Berkouwer and H. Dooyeweerd as well as H. Kuitert and J. Dame. Although it was not always evident to others, this was painful for him. It was usually with a heavy heart that he pursued these critiques within the Reformed family.

After graduating from Calvin Theological Seminary, it was my privilege to spend two and one-half years in graduate work at Westminster. In the 1940s Westminster's faculty (N. Stonehouse, J. Young, P. Woolley, J. Murray, R. B. Kuiper, C. Van Til) was perhaps the most gifted and influential Reformed faculty in the world. My wife and I lived in a small apartment in the home of Uncle Kees and Aunt Rena. Those were delightful and extremely profitable years for me as I engaged in daily dialogue with Uncle Kees and regularly enjoyed afternoon coffee and cake with them while my good wife worked in the city to support us. A fiend for exercise, Uncle Kees was always ready for a hearty walk through the rural countryside of his Chestnut Hill home in suburban Philadelphia. Those walks were an important part of my education. He always talked about theology and theologians, past and present, and about the past and present struggles of the churches. From such conversations I learned how difficult it was for him to say what he was convinced had to be said in criticism of fellow Reformed theologians. Those matters cost him many sleepless nights and a good deal of psychological anguish.

Van Til's lifestyle was simple and his energies surprising, especially in view of constant health problems. He was an authentic person, a genuine Christian, godly and devoted. He was a Christian pastor to his neighbors and to his students and friends. He called on sick neighbors regularly and witnessed to them in simple ways as he presented the gospel. He understood his academic discipline of apologetics to have evangelistic goals. He felt most at home with the common people and he prized his summer visits to Indiana with family and farmer friends. Yet his influence was worldwide and many of his former students throughout the world carry on with "an epistemological self-consciousness" awakened by this former Indiana farmer.

Cornelius Van Til was a prolific writer. During the 1930s he began to produce syllabi for his seminar courses. These were regularly revised. During his retirement years several syllabi were revised and published. He lectured frequently at conferences and other seminaries and made his case for the Reformed faith in several of the major universities in the country. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 1965, Dr. Van Til was honored with a special issue of the Presbyterian Guardian which contained articles by colleagues and friends. I especially enjoyed the article by Professor Paul Woolley, his longtime colleague at Westminster and the only other living member of Westminster's original faculty at the time. In 1970, at the time of his seventy-fifth birthday, an impressive "Festschrift" of almost five-hundred pages was published; its title is Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (1971). This is an important book for students who wish to hear from critics as well as admirers of Van Til's apologetics. The word "critical" in the title is accurate; the book contains praise and thanks as well as critique from a variety of scholars — Reformed and others. The twenty-five contributors include the names Stoker, Dooyeweerd, Packer, Berkouwer, Zuidema and Ridderbos as well as Jack Rogers, Paul Jewett, R. Rushdoony, J. Montgomery and C. Pinnock. Van Til has a written response of varied length to fourteen of the contributors and a nineteen-page opening essay called "My Credo" in which he sets himself "to explaining in non-philosophical terms precisely what he proposes as a consistently Christian apologetic," as editor E.R. Geehan describes it. A seven-page bibliography of Van Til's numerous publications arranges them chronologically under five headings: books, articles, reviews, syllabi and pamphlets.

Van Til's eightieth birthday was celebrated at Westminster with a concert in his honor. On that occasion the Board of Trustees officially named its new class-room-chapel building, "Van Til Hall." Thus, in the providence of God, two men whose lives began to be entwined at Princeton in the 1920s now have their names enshrined in adjoining buildings of the Westminster campus — Machen Hall and Van Til Hall. The May 1975 issue of the Presbyterian Guardian carried a laudatory commemorative article by a Chinese Christian Reformed minister, the Rev. Paul Szto, who was greatly influenced by Van Til's apologetics.
1978 was one of Van Til's most difficult years. On January 11, Rena, his devoted wife of fifty-three years, died. She cheerfully and lovingly cared for her busy husband in his tension full life. Taken far from her immediate family and relatives, she adapted well to the academic life of faculty and students. Summers meant extended visits to Indiana with her husband and their son, Earl Calvin. Those were months of renewal with family and friends that strengthened the family again for the academic year ahead. I vividly recall the night before their return to Philadelphia as all the Klooster relatives gathered to say farewell, and we all sang "God be with you till we meet again." Tears flowed like a river by then and we younger ones really doubted that we would ever see each other again!

The final decade of Van Til's life was one of aging — yet surprising resilience. He continued occasional lectures and speeches. He accepted invitations to visit friends in California as well as Indiana and elsewhere. There was another valley through which he had to pass however. His only child, Earl, was also taken away suddenly by death. In spite of health problems during most of his mature life (he referred humorously to his "pill doctor" for one week and his "rub doctor" for the following week), the old warrior went to his eternal reward on April 17, 1987, just a few weeks short of his 92nd birthday.

FH Klooster

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