



The significance of Cornelius van Til

Dr. Cornelius Van Til was one of Westminster Theological Seminary's most famous and influential faculty members. This itself says something about his significance. Dr. Van Til was influential, largely through his vigorous teaching and his extensive writings. But like many other Christian leaders Van Til aroused not only profound respect and devotion but also deep and determined opposition. This was abetted by his style of approach. He took as a motto the saying: *suaviter in modo; fortiter in re*. That is, he aimed to be smooth in his approach, yet forceful in making his point. He was passionately committed to the teachings of the Bible and to the theology that has interpreted them the most adequately, the Reformed Faith, and he drove his points home single-mindedly and in a way that offered no hint of compromise. All this says something about Van Til; but it does not paint the portrait of the man as to his significance.

In his vigorous way, Van Til was carrying on a tradition that drew from the revival in Switzerland which had stirred the hearts of Van Til's spiritual forebears in the Netherlands: Bilderdijk, Da Costa, Groen van Prinsterer, and Abraham Kuyper. This tradition placed Jesus Christ and His kingship at the center of life and thought. According to it, everything must center in Jesus Christ, not only in the church but also in the home, the school, the marketplace, the realm of politics indeed, in all of society. Dr. Van Til was fond of quoting Abraham Kuyper's saying, "*There is not one inch of life concerning which Christ does not say 'It is mine'.*" With Kuyper he could say, "*Life is religion.*" Van Til is significant for having carried on this radically Christian tradition. In his teaching and in his writing, he came with the bold claim that one cannot truly do anything or say anything without depending in some way on Jesus Christ. As the Bible says, everything hangs together in Him. One does not understand the significance of Van Til apart from this radically Christian commitment, and one is not a true follower of Van Til unless he shares the conviction that Christ is Lord over all of life and thought.

Dr. Van Til's significance is also measured in the fact that he took this tradition and applied it to the defense of the Christian faith, which we call Christian apologetics. His spiritual forebears did not do this, nor did his contemporaries. They built on this foundation edifices of Christian life style, Christian social and political vision, Christian education, Christian philosophy, Christian journalism; but it was only Van Til who took the insights of Kuyper, Gerhardus Vos, and others concerning the kingdom and applied them to the defense of the faith. To defend the citadel of Christianity, Van Til said, one does not have to leave its walls and make a truce with the enemy. One must defend Christianity while remaining solidly entrenched within it. Indeed, Van Til shared the concern of Kuyper and others for a society built on Christian principles. He was concerned, for instance, with Christian philosophy. For many years he was a member of the editorial staff of *Philosophia Reformata*, the quarterly journal of the Association for Calvinistic Philosophy. Early in his teaching career at the Seminary, he himself founded a short-lived association for the study of Christian philosophy. Near the end of his life, I am told, he expressed great satisfaction that he had been instrumental in helping to found the Philadelphia Montgomery Christian Academy. Nevertheless, one does not understand Van Til unless he sees him as one who accepted the radical claim of Christ on all of life and who applied it to Christian apologetics. This commitment made him reject all compromise with the wisdom of the world, as that wisdom sets itself up against the wisdom of Christ; this commitment led him to reject the way of accommodation and inspired him to make a frontal assault on the phalanx of unbelief. It was this attitude that made Van Til the uncompromising warrior that he was. One does not understand Van Til in his significance unless he sees him as one who applied the biblical teaching concerning the antithesis between belief and unbelief to apologetics. And one is not a true follower of Van Til unless he himself seeks to develop

a defense of the faith that is fully aware of its biblical foundations and that challenges unbelief at its roots.

Even as all of us, Van Til was not without sin. He had difficulty relating to those who disagreed with him. He shied back from bringing his ideas into the forum for quiet discussion. These were faults, they were blemishes; but they do not make up the portrait of the man. This portrait is seen in clearer light if we remember a man who trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins, who in the name of Christ gave attention to the little as well as the great, who visited the sick, who counseled with those who were in need, who sought every occasion to witness to the grace that is in Christ Jesus. But we miss the significance of all this if we think of piety on the order of a Buddha looking at its own navel. True piety. He revelled in the message of the psalms, also as these have been set to music in the Genevan psalter; he gloried in the vision of the Book of Revelation of the new heavens and the new earth. Near the end of his life, he asked again and again for these psalms, and to hear these prophecies of the coming of the kingdom. He was completely taken with the opening question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I, in body and soul, in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

But, again, one does not understand the significance of all this unless he sees that it is true piety that must underlie and undergird our entire attitude of mind. Our life and our thought must be rooted completely in the God who has revealed and who is revealing himself to us at every point, who has revealed himself to us in these last days in Jesus Christ. One does not understand Van Til in his significance who does not realize that true religion is the service of God with all one's heart, in the place and within the circumstances where God has placed us. In Van Til we have had a man of great accomplishments; but the greatness of the man must be observed, first of all, in the fact that he did everything in devotion to Christ. Van Til once said to me that he tried to do the things that were most important. We must not understand this to mean that he tried to do those things that would add to his own importance but that he first tried to do those things that were most important for the kingdom of God. We are not true followers of Dr. Van Til unless we too realize that whatever our accomplishments may be these are finally of no worth unless they have been done in humble dependence on Christ and on His grace.

We shall not truly honor Dr. Cornelius Van Til if we simply enshrine his memory. We shall not truly follow him if we simply repeat what he has said. A life that is truly religious will seek constantly to tap the virgin springs of biblical truth and faith.

Thought that is truly obedient will constantly test itself in the light of that Word faithfully received. We must go on. Now as always the church must be reformed and reforming. We take the same stance as Van Til did, who pictured himself as standing on the shoulders of those who went before him. Accepting the legacy of faithful men, we too labor in the present, looking to the future and the great coming of our Lord and Savior. Even so come, Lord Jesus!

Robert D Knudsen

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