

Das Machen des Van Til (~the making of Van Til)

1. Introduction

- a. *Thesis*: Machen was the historical key to Van Til's apologetic influence.
- b. Four main reasons Machen made Van Til the Van Til that we know
 - 1) Princeton – an initial teaching post.
 - 2) Westminster – non-antagonistic faculty.
 - 3) OPC – freedom from some of the problems the CRC encountered.
 - 4) Early death allowed Van Til to flourish and receive attention.

2. Machen and the 1926 General Assembly

3. Van Til at Princeton: Student and Teacher

4. The Faculty of WTS: Machen's Courtship of Van Til

- a. Stonehouse: "It is clear to me that the only way in which he can be won is by your coming personally and trying to convince him that you must have him in view of the *present* need, and that you are willing to regard the appointment as a *temporary* one."¹
- b. "How good it was for those of us whom he had chosen to labor with on the faculty,... to be with him daily and often to go out to lunch with him after the Saturday morning faculty meeting. He did not preach at us telling us to do this or to do that. He left us free in the true sense of the word, freedom to develop our work for ourselves. But we could not help but imbibe something of his spirit of unreserved devotion to the one goal of lifting up the banner of Christ on top of the highest mountain."²

5. Van Til's Contribution

- a. "Van Til expanded these ideas in his 1926 ThM thesis, which he wrote for C.W. Hodge (grandson of Charles Hodge and successor to B.B. Warfield). Here he emphasized the Kuyperian principle of the antithesis between covenant keeping and covenant breaking, and he drew conclusions about the epistemological expression of this antithesis... Van Til contrasted various ways of knowing that corresponded to the fourfold state of man as revealed in Scripture... [innocence, sin, grace, glory]... Reformed epistemology entails an Adamic consciousness, a non-regenerate consciousness, and a regenerate consciousness. This thesis, which Van Til further developed in his syllabus on Christian epistemology, reinforces his interest in developing and distinctively Reformed apologetic. Reformed theology requires a Reformed apologetic."³

¹ John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 62.

² Van Til, *Why Westminster Today*.

³ Muether, 55.

- b. Important passages
 - i. Rom 1:18-21
 - ii. 1 Cor 2:9-16
 - iii. Rom 5:12-19

- c. B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) – Princeton Theological Seminary

- d. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) – Free University of Amsterdam

- e. Van Til on Warfield and Kuyper
 - i. “Standing on the shoulders of Warfield and Kuyper we honor them best if we build on the main thrust of their thought rather than if we insist on carrying on what is inconsistent with their basic position. Then are we most faithful to Calvin and to St. Paul.”⁴

 - ii. “It has not been possible to avoid a discussion of the difference between these two great modern Reformed theologians, Kuyper and Warfield. The difference between Kuyper and Warfield on the matter of apologetics is there and it is important. It is impossible to ignore it and to speak as though there were only minor differences of emphasis between them. It is impossible to follow both Kuyper and Warfield, however, much lovers of the Reformed Faith may revere them both. On the other hand the difference between them should not be over-stressed.

With grateful acknowledgement of indebtedness to both Kuyper and Warfield, to Herman Bavinck and other associates and followers of Kuyper, to the various associates and followers of Warfield, to J. Gresham Machen in particular, we would take their common basic contribution to the idea of the full Christian faith and the self-attesting Scripture and build as best as we can upon it. The great contribution of Kuyper discussed in this chapter is that of his analysis of the idea of autonomy. Never again can we forget that the natural man, working from his adopted principle, will seek to weave the special principle into the natural principle, and that he will seek to do this in philosophy and science no less than in theology. The great contribution of Warfield discussed in this chapter is his insistence that Christian theism is the only internally intelligible system of truth.

Combining these two great principles, held by both men, but not equally emphasized by both, we shall claim that the Christian system is undoubtedly true, that it is distinguishable intellectually by men because it has been distinguished for them by God through his Word, and that unless one therefore presupposes its truth there is no theology, no philosophy, and no science that can find intelligible meaning in human experience.”⁵

⁴ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 397.

⁵ Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 253-54. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 596-612.

6. Machen: The Historical “Key” to Van Til, Reformed Apologist

- a. If Machen would have been *for* prohibition then Van Til would have stayed at Spring Lake longer and would not have taught at Princeton – at least in 1928.
 - i. “Furthermore, had Machen transitioned successfully into that field before he formed Westminster Seminary in 1929, he would not have solicited Van Til’s services. Thus Machen’s defeat in the church was crucial in creating the career path for Van Til, both at Princeton and later at Westminster.”⁶
- b. If Machen did not work so hard to get Van Til to join the faculty of Westminster then Van Til would probably have taught at Calvin Theological Seminary.
 - i. He was offered a job there on three occasions – once to be president.
 - ii. Embroiled in fights with the faculty.
 - iii. Would not have had the colleague support to develop his views.
- c. If Machen did not found the OPC and stress the need for Van Til to come with then
 - i. Van Til would have stayed in the CRC.
 - ii. Van Til would have been involved in battles over various church issues.
- d. If Machen didn’t die in 1937
 - i. The torch would not have passed to Van Til – at least that early.
 - ii. Van Til might not have received as much attention when he did.
 - iii. Van Til’s influence in the OPC might have been different.

⁶ Muether, 59.