

TRAGEDY, HOPE AND AMBIVALENCE:  
THE HISTORY OF THE  
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
1936-1962

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Part Two: Hope

*Buswell's Last Letter to Machen*

On December 4, 1936, J. Oliver Buswell, president of Wheaton College and member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, wrote to J. Gresham Machen for the last time. Usually prompt in his responses, especially to Buswell, Machen left this letter unanswered, intending to reply during the upcoming Christmas break from his classes at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Once at his brother Arthur's Baltimore home over Christmas, Machen began an answer but never finished. He died New Year's Day, 1937.

A hint as to why Machen found it so difficult to respond to Buswell appears in the draft fragment that survives.<sup>1</sup> The tone is abrupt. Machen seems to be grieved about the persistent obtuseness of his fundamentalist opponents. He had already concluded in his November 27 letter to Buswell that the fundamentalism represented by James E. Bennet was unethical and sub-Christian.<sup>2</sup> Not only had Bennet's victory in the Independent Board meant the impossibility for the board to be true to its charter, but Bennet had engaged in a smear campaign against Machen to achieve his goal.

Adding this to his contempt for Carl McIntire's under-handedness and H. McAllister Griffiths' mean-spiritedness, Machen had no patience for Buswell's attempts to massage Scofield dispensationalism. As Machen said in the draft fragment, "[T]he use of the Scofield Bible [is]

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<sup>1</sup> Both Buswell's letter and the rough draft of Machen's response are found in the Machen archives (Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia).

<sup>2</sup>On Bennet, see "Tragedy, Hope, and Ambivalence: The History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1936-1962; Part One: Tragedy," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 8/2 (1992): 147-159.

a very terrible evil that is doing untold harm, doctrinally and morally, to the souls of man." In short, dispensationalism is heresy.<sup>3</sup>

Two further elements in Buswell's letter undoubtedly annoyed Machen. The first was the veiled charge that Machen and his friends at the *Presbyterian Guardian* and at Westminster Seminary were "undemocratic and dictatorial," and that they were envious of McIntire's ability "to start the [*Christian Beacon*] and to conduct it with such a degree of success . . . ." Machen's unseating as president of the Independent Board was, therefore, in the "spirit of democracy." And although he never said so, Buswell implied that this action was an indirect form of discipline.

The other thing that had to annoy Machen was Buswell's attack upon the Westminster apologetic, at the center of which, although never named by Buswell, was the figure of Cornelius Van Til. Buswell observed that Machen may not be in agreement with what had been happening. Nevertheless, the position of the seminary, said Buswell, had shifted over the past five years. Buswell supported the "historical apologetics and biblical exegesis" of James Orr, of Robert Dick Wilson, and of Machen himself as evidenced in his works *The Origin of Paul's Religion* and *The Virgin Birth*. But now the tendency at Westminster was to substitute what the faculty called a theological, but what Buswell called a philosophical apologetic. According to Buswell, Westminster was headed in "the wrong direction," a "dangerous" direction that weakened the critical position of the graduates and their practical usefulness.

Interestingly, Buswell linked the new Westminster apologetic with amillennialism, as if the two were joined inseparably. Buswell does not explain himself here, but what he may have had in mind was the fact that fundamentalists were convinced evidentialism was more conducive to their own system, the priority of proofs being essential for their eschatological scheme. While it is incorrect to say that Van Til's presuppositionalism dismisses or ignores proofs altogether, it most certainly assigns them a limited and subordinate position. As a result, evidentialist fundamentalists like Buswell criticized Van Til for

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<sup>3</sup>Machen detailed his case against dispensationalism in a letter to Buswell, dated October 19, 1936. He charged, "As one reads Dr. Scofield's notes one does not for the most part get the slightest inkling of the fact that anything irrevocable took place when Adam fell. After the fall of man continued to be tested in successive dispensations. . . . That is one of the things that seems to me to be so profoundly heretical in this commentary (i.e., *The Scofield Reference Bible*)."

substanceless theorizing<sup>4</sup> and the amillennialists for "etherialized abstraction."<sup>5</sup> Buswell preferred the demonstrably concrete, earthy realities, those consistent with his interest in an earthly millennium. Where Machen stood on the apologetical question continues to be debated. Greg Bahnsen's argument that Machen's and Van Til's apologetics were actually compatible, if not one, has difficulty standing up to a review of the facts.<sup>6</sup> However, on the other side, Allan MacRae's contention that Machen privately scoffed at Van Til's position seems irreconcilable with the recollections of others, including Van Til.<sup>7</sup> The truth of the matter most likely has much to do with Machen's "re-education" and with his loyalty to the seminary. Regarding his

<sup>4</sup>Buswell had his own version of presuppositionalism; cf. Buswell's *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, I (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 15ff. Buswell's perspective comes through in these words: "In what sense do we students of theology presuppose our basic presupposition? There may be many answers to this question but only one is necessary for our procedure: we take our presupposition as a conclusion arrived at on the basis of what we consider good and sufficient reasons." Interestingly, as he never mentioned Van Til's name in his last letter to Machen, so he follows suit for the 1200 pages of this two volume work. But as the above quote demonstrates, it would have been beneficial to Buswell had he interacted critically and more directly with Van Til.

<sup>5</sup>Buswell makes a veiled reference to Geerhardus Vos' eschatology in "A Premillennialist View," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (November 14, 1936): 47; cf. Buswell to Machen, October 21, 1936. Greater attention needs to be paid to Vos as far as the OPC's internal battles over millennialism are concerned. Although not a member of the OPC, he was the figure standing behind John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse on this issue. He also was connected in general theological outlook to R.B. Kuiper, another person directly involved in the conflict. Vos brought a different orientation to eschatology; no mere conclusion for the systematic theology enterprise nor merely the consideration of the events by which this world ends, eschatology stood central to the gospel, Christian living, and theological reflection; see esp. *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton: pub. by the author, 1930). Buswell goes to great lengths to refute Vos in *Unfulfilled Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937). Murray's charge that Buswell had grossly misrepresented Vos helped to lay bare the controversy over eschatology brewing in the OPC; cf. Murray's "Dr. Buswell's Premillennialism," *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (February 27, 1937): 206-209.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Bahnsen's "Machen, Van Til and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC," *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, edited by Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1986), 259-294.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. recorded interview with MacRae October 24, 1991; see also William White, Jr. *Van Til: Defender of the Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1979), 99; and further Robert L. Atwell, "The Heritage of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," *New Horizons* 2 (May/June 1981): 4. Atwell recalls, "Some were astonished and mystified that Machen would not even consider accepting Van Til's resignation when he offered it at the end of his first year of teaching." Tradition has it that Machen, on this occasion, quipped, "We're not even accepting the janitor's resignation."

"re-education," Machen had become, in many ways, the student to the faculty he had assembled in Philadelphia. His re-education began with the organization of Westminster Seminary in 1929. Here was a man in transition, moving from an evangelical Presbyterianism of his earlier years to a more thorough confessionally Reformed Presbyterianism, learning that being Reformed meant more than he dreamed.<sup>8</sup>

Machen's re-education was theological in the deepest sense. Looking at his works prior to 1929, we find few references to distinctive Reformed doctrines. There are general references to the Reformed faith or to a general Presbyterianism but no substantive treatment of the doctrines of historic Calvinism. After 1929, specifics surface about the covenant, predestination, limited atonement, eschatology, and the active obedience of Christ. According to Oswald T. Allis, Machen's interaction with and response to dispensationalism took place in the last years of his life. It was as if he were learning about it and its dangers for the first time.<sup>9</sup>

The most difficult area was apologetics. Machen had been devoted to the Princeton apologetic as represented by B.B. Warfield.<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that Van Til's position was no "quick study," Machen found himself listening and weighing. However, he was a popular speaker, much in demand, this adding burdens to his already over-full schedule, hardly allowing him the leisure to revamp his apologetical method. Therefore, when he spoke along apologetical lines, even into the last year of his life, he did so in keeping with his past commitment to evidentialism and natural theology. This is clear from his 1936 radio speech, "How May God Be Known?" which is included in *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*.<sup>11</sup>

However, and as contrary as it may sound, Machen was completely committed to Van Til. This was in part because of Machen's fondness

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<sup>8</sup>I present my case for this position in "Machen, Culture, and the Church," *Banner of Truth* (July 1987): 20-27, 32.

<sup>9</sup>Oswald T. Allis' undated audio interview on file in the OPC archives. Machen, of course, was aware of the discussions about the millenianism; cf. Machen's remark on chiliasm in *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1923), 48ff.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Machen's "My Idea of God," *Woman's Home Companion* (December 1925): 15, 124; also note the apologetical approach in *What is Faith?* (New York: MacMillan, 1925); for example, see Machen's classical defense of the claims for theism and Christianity, 131ff. For Warfield's position, see "Apologetics," *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 3-21.

<sup>11</sup>Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (New York: MacMillan, 1936), 13-22.

for the man. Van Til was magnetic, tremendously winsome and popular with the students, much like Machen himself. There was a bond between these two men at a personal level. But Machen, more importantly, was completely loyal to Westminster and saw in Van Til someone with the same intense devotion to the movement of which Westminster was a part. For the sake of the movement, Machen was concerned that the seminary present a united front against all attacks, Buswell's not excepted.

### *The Split of 1937*

Of course, there is another aspect to Machen's response to Buswell. Because Machen lacked facility with Van Til's method, because he was so much the student to Van Til in the situation, he probably did not know what to say to Buswell.<sup>12</sup> At least he could see this much: If Van Til was right, some radical rethinking would have to be done about the Princeton apologetic and about his own view of American Presbyterianism.

This placed Machen in a difficult position. His strategy had been to build on the message that Westminster Seminary and the OPC were the true spiritual descendants of the Princeton Seminary and the PCUSA. Thus he hoped to avoid the charge of schism. The argument was, "We are the continuing church; they left us, we didn't leave them." Machen, therefore, appealed to a general Presbyterian population for sympathy and support, hoping that some would join the OPC in order to remain with the true Presbyterian line.

Machen's position drove him to fight tenaciously at the OPC's Second General Assembly, November 12-14, 1936, for the adoption of

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<sup>12</sup>Machen's humility made him hesitant to speak about things he felt he had not adequately studied. His refusal to speak on the evolution debate is well known; cf. Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 401f. Stonehouse writes: "His scholarly instincts simply did not permit him to pose as an authority in such fields as biology and geology" (402). Recently, Machen's struggle with the philosophical roots and theological value of neoorthodoxy has come to light. His decision not to go into print on the issue further confirms the point; see his previously unpublished article, "Karl Barth and 'The Theology of Crisis,'" *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 197-207. In his uncertainty about the new theology, he exhibited growing confidence in Van Til's judgment, a fact adding weight to the contention that Machen was not moving away from Van Til but drawing closer; cf. D. G. Hart, "Machen on Barth: Introduction to a Recently Uncovered Paper," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 189-196.

the Westminster Standards in their pre-1903 form.<sup>13</sup> The additions in 1903 to the Westminster Confession had severely crippled the Calvinism of the Confession and had confirmed the PCUSA's Arminian and liberal direction.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the PCUSA had forfeited its right to the heritage it claimed. Machen believed that, by going back to the pre-1903 form of the Confession, the OPC would lay claim to the original intention and commitment of the PCUSA. Here was the true Presbyterian Church in the USA.<sup>15</sup>

However, McIntire and other fundamentalists in the OPC argued at the Second General Assembly for the retention of the 1903 additions. McIntire spoke in favor of an overture from the Presbytery of New Jersey to delay the question of the adoption of the Confession's form until the next assembly. In the meantime he intended to solicit support in the presbyteries and from the church's membership for the adoption of the Confession in its post-1903 form. According to McIntire, the continuing church could lay claim to true spiritual succession to the PCUSA, with the fullest possible leverage in pending property settlement cases, only if the 1903 amendments were retained, i.e., only if the doctrinal standards at the point of filing suit were identical.

Machen saw delay "a calamity beyond words . . ." Van Til came to Machen's defense at the assembly and the pending motion was defeated.<sup>16</sup> Machen and Van Til stood together, therefore, against the perceived threat of Arminianism veiled within the fundamentalist gospel.<sup>17</sup> They spoke on behalf of the deeper Presbyterianism, a

<sup>13</sup>By "pre-1903 form," I do not mean to overlook the retention by the OPC of the two brief 1903 omissions — one declaring it sinful to refuse an oath when the civil magistrate requires it (Westminster Confession, XXII, 3) and the other declaring the Pope the Antichrist (Confession, XXV, 6).

<sup>14</sup>For more on the 1903 amendments, see Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1992), chapter 1; Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), chapter 10.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Ned B. Stonehouse, "What Was Back of the Revision of 1903?" *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (September 26, 1936): 247-249; and John Murray, "Shall We Include the Revision of 1903 in our Creed?" *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (September 26, 1936): 249-251.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. the account of the debate in "The Second General Assembly," *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (November 28, 1936): 81-83.

<sup>17</sup>The issue of Arminianism in Presbyterian fundamentalism remains a subject in need of further study. Kuiper was convinced that the Arminianism was not merely in the 1903 amendments but in the fundamentalists themselves, and that the battle for the church posed a grave theological threat along these lines; see his letter to Henry Coray, April 4, 1938 (OPC archives). The seriousness of the threat may account for Machen's vigorous

full-orbed confessional Calvinism, that they felt undergirded old Princeton and the old church. What Van Til and most of the members of Westminster's young faculty saw, and what had become clear to Machen, was the significant difference between the Presbyterianism they loved and the so-called "American Presbyterianism" promoted by Presbyterian fundamentalism.

The fundamentalists' version of Presbyterianism placed great stock in its vision for America. Despite their pre-millennialism, these people, for all their pessimism about this world, were "bully" on America and overly concerned about property. Their evangelistic and moral zeal was connected to their patriotic ardor. Politically they opposed big government and anything that smacked of socialism. Here were the champions of American individualism and democracy, features they felt had to be reflected in the church as well as in society. In their mission enterprises, they saw themselves exporting American values as they exported the gospel. They blended their energetic evangelistic enterprising with the commercialism of their day. George Marsden's comparison of McIntire's fundamentalism to the sales division of a modern corporation carried more sting than Marsden intended.<sup>18</sup>

As we might expect, Presbyterian fundamentalists generated a strong protectionist spirit, highly suspicious of and down-right hostile to foreign influences. H. McAllister Griffiths expressed himself on this issue in this way: Those who had come to "dominate the policies of Westminster Seminary and the [OPC were] not of American Presbyterian background."<sup>19</sup> He had in mind John Murray, the Scot from the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland and professors Kuiper, Stonehouse, and Van Til, all of "Holland Dutch extraction." Griffiths charged these men with deliberately plotting an attack on modern dispensationalism and, in the course of their attack, inadvertently destroying what fundamentalists such as himself revered in the new church. As a result of this attack, he said, premillennialists felt they were no longer welcome in the OPC.

Allan MacRae stood on similar ground but was more specific. Resigning from Westminster Seminary in April 1937, MacRae com-

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defense of the limited atonement in his sermon "Constraining Love," which he delivered at the beginning of the Second General Assembly; see this sermon in *God Transcendent*, edited by Ned B. Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 130-143.

<sup>18</sup>"Perspectives on the Division of 1937," *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 323.

<sup>19</sup>"Since the Syracuse Assembly, Part V," *Christian Beacon* 2 (September 2, 1937): 7.

plained that "[c]ontrol of the faculty had passed into the hands of a small alien group without American Presbyterian background."<sup>20</sup> Later, he indicated he meant no offense to Murray, only to the Dutchmen.<sup>21</sup> Among the Dutchmen, he singled out Van Til as especially responsible for undermining his position at Westminster. MacRae said, "The effect of [Van Til's] teaching upon the students had more to do with my resignation than anything else."<sup>22</sup> From MacRae's perspective, the apologetics question equalled in importance the eschatology question. In this MacRae echoed Buswell; he together with the other fundamentalists in the OPC saw the new seminary and church headed in directions foreign to their vision for American Presbyterianism.

The whole matter came to a head at the Third General Assembly, June 1-4, 1937. When the assembly overwhelmingly voted to organize its own committee on foreign missions, the mood of the church was set and the Independent Board was thereby abandoned. The assembly then proceeded to reject overtures calling for the endorsement of total abstinence, another plank in the fundamentalist platform. Fourteen ministers and three elders withdrew from the church after the assembly, and the following year the Bible Presbyterian Synod was organized. The fundamentalists justified their action on the ground that the OPC had departed "from the historic position of American Presbyterianism."<sup>23</sup>

### *A Presbyterian Anomaly*

It was now apparent that the OPC was not the continuation of the old church. At least to the extent that the fundamentalists, who were at one time comfortable with the old church, were not comfortable in the new. But, as Machen himself must have realized before his death, the OPC was turning out to be at odds with the old church in a far deeper sense. Here, the figure increasingly taking center stage at Westminster Seminary and in the consciousness of the church was Van Til, a man virtually turning the study of apologetics head over heels.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>MacRae's letter of resignation appears in the *Christian Beacon* 2 (April 29, 1937): 1-2.

<sup>21</sup>MacRae's taped interview, October 24, 1991.

<sup>22</sup>MacRae's taped interview, October 24, 1991.

<sup>23</sup>George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1974), 247.

<sup>24</sup>A short presentation by Van Til of his position appears in "My Credo," *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, editor E.R. Geehan (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 3-21. Many attempts



Van Til's apologetic was revolutionary in two ways. First, Van Til did not see the task of apologetics as that of establishing the validity of first principles upon the basis of neutral reason and in the interests of a natural theology, as had been the classical position expressed at old Princeton. For Van Til, apologetics was the defense of the faith, not the defense of the possibility of faith. For the defense of the faith, Van Til concluded that apologetics presupposes the truth of the biblical revelation about the ontological Trinity and about the Bible's own redemptive-historical center, the self-attesting Christ.<sup>25</sup> But further, the faith Van Til sought to defend was that of the Reformed churches, expressed in their creeds. Van Til's apologetics, therefore, was self-consciously biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical.

Second, Van Til's apologetic was philosophical; it was overtly so, a sin for which the Buswells of the fundamentalist world could not forgive him. But, the fuming of Presbyterian fundamentalism aside, the philosophical dimension of Van Til's apologetic had even greater significance for the wider currents of mainline Presbyterianism. Van Til recognized within the mainline church, as he did within mainline Protestantism generally, the streams of Enlightenment thought. In fact, these streams were not quiet tributaries but a raging flood.

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have been made to explain Van Til in layman's terms; two noteworthy attempts are Robert K. Churchill, *Lest We Forget: A Personal Reflection on the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 53ff.; and Grover Gunn, *A Short Explanation and Defense of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Greenville: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, n.d.).

<sup>25</sup>In critical evaluations of Van Til, the dimension of his thought that continues to be short-changed is his dependence on a redemptive-historical hermeneutic. He was an appreciative student of Vos and a devoted reader of Schilder. His lectures, sermons, and prayers were famous for their panoramic sweep, moving from Genesis through Revelation. One attempt to do justice to Van Til in this regard is William D. Dennison's *Paul's Two-Age Construction and Apologetics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), a work worthy of note because of its effort to show the link between Van Til and Vos. An outworking of the argument expressed here is that the self-attesting Christ of Scripture, whom Van Til presupposes, is the Christ of redemptive history, as he is revealed from Genesis to Revelation. The church has no other Christ. Therefore, leaving the redemptive-historical dimension out of a critical evaluation of Van Til is wrongheaded at the most basic level. On Van Til and the redemptive-historical connection, see also Edmund P. Clowney, "Preaching the Word of the Lord: Cornelius Van Til, V.D.M." *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 233-253.

Support for Van Til's position comes from an interesting place. In 1977 Henry Steele Commager published *The Empire of Reason*.<sup>26</sup> His thesis is simple: The Enlightenment of the 18th century, with its boast in human autonomy and natural reason, did not fare as well in Europe as ordinarily thought. Actually faltering in Europe, the Enlightenment crossed the Atlantic and found a home in the developing colonies. We may question his thesis about the Enlightenment faltering in Europe. Still, Commager does make a good case for how well it did in America.

Moving the discussion into Presbyterian circles, Mark Noll has written about the influences on James Madison.<sup>27</sup> He finds a central influence on Madison in John Witherspoon, Presbyterian president at the College of New Jersey (Princeton) and Madison's teacher. Witherspoon was a Scottish immigrant and a clergyman who emerged quite the spokesman for an Enlightenment version of public religion. His roots were in the common sense philosophy of the Scottish realists. But in the end, his view of man in so many ways was indistinguishable from the Enlightenment ideal. Man could, it seems, with a mind unaided by biblical revelation, determine truth and could progress in that truth for the sake of the betterment of society.

From Witherspoon to the 1930s, the Presbyterian steamroller had been on the move. Many Presbyterians may have espoused an evangelical theology, even a robust Calvinism within the walls of the church. But they struck common cause in the public square with Enlightenment ideology under the banner of autonomous reason and societal improvement. In time, the Enlightenment ideology, deemed appropriate for the public square, moved into the church and into her message. The better life in this world replaced eternal life with God in the world to come as the goal of worthy religion. While a few brave souls held out in the back room for the old theology, even they hardly grasped what went wrong since, in their own way, they too had capitulated to autonomous reason and to the cultural vision of the establishment.

These developments added to the tragedy of J. Gresham Machen. His outspoken, intelligent, militant stand for orthodoxy earned him a one-way ticket out of the church but also out of the culture of which that church was an integral part. He became an alien in a culture that Presbyterianism had helped to forge, a culture that he knew at its best,

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<sup>26</sup>Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977).

<sup>27</sup>Mark Noll, "James Madison: From Evangelical Princeton to the Constitutional Convention," *Pro Rege* 16 (December 1987): 2-14.

and better than most of his fellow Presbyterians. Not that he understood this or even welcomed it, but he became a counter-cultural figure in the best sense of that word. Something of the pilgrim identity of the church and of genuine Christianity intruded upon him as he, for the sake of his true reward, God himself, was being prepared to lose everything. What we find in Machen at this point we find also in the movement he fathered; it was from its beginnings disenfranchised. Presbyterians historically are establishmentarians. They are so, it would seem, by definition. Their histories are tied to the questions: Who would be the establishment? and What would the establishment look like? With the OPC the mold was broken. As things worked themselves out in the providence of God, here was a Presbyterian church that did not fit the definition. Without establishment credentials, the OPC was destined to be a Presbyterian anomaly in an environment where the Presbyterian Church was the establishment.

Van Til's philosophical apologetic speaks effectively to the OPC's situation. Its message about the antithetical nature of the faith is ready-made for the church's stand against the world. But it also helps the OPC to see that it cannot be a mere continuation of the old church. The old church, even at its best, was critically flawed. It would not do to long for a return to the establishmentarianism of the American Presbyterian model.

Here, beyond the millennial issue, or the temperance question, or the debate with modernism, was the crucial issue. For the OPC, the tie to American culture, inherent to American Presbyterianism, had been severed. Fundamentalists, for all their other-worldliness, proved to be very worldly, maintaining a well constructed cultural bridge. They had as many ties to the social and political activism of New School Presbyterianism as the liberals.<sup>28</sup> When they witnessed the demolition of their bridge in the early days of the OPC by those who, like Van Til, had little or no interest in their vision for America, they left.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale, 1970); cf. George M. Marsden, "The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism," *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 169-182.

<sup>29</sup>The issue of a cultural bridge remains a critical feature for the OPC's identity. The absence of just such a bridge has proved to be the unexamined dimension to the ecumenical breakdown experienced by the OPC in its quest for union with other American Presbyterian bodies. The 1975 attempt at union with the former Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod collapsed because the RPCES, a child of fundamentalism and the dissenting Reformed Presbyterian tradition, maintained a cultural vision that could not accept OP disenfranchisement. From the RPCES's point of view, OP disenfranchisement

At the other end of the spectrum, liberal Presbyterians did not need a cultural bridge since they were well integrated into the culture. In fact, they were the culture. Consequently, they looked with even more contempt at the OPC and Van Til for telling them that the world they had made, boasted about, and believed in, was rotten.

### *Van Til and Hope*

Van Til's greatest struggle within the new church would not be with the fundamentalists in the thirties. In the 1940s he became the central figure in a battle within the OPC with a residual evangelicalism and a form of Presbyterian elitism.<sup>30</sup> The first chapter of this struggle was written in the creation of the so-called Committee of Nine, erected by the Eighth General Assembly (1941). The motion to establish this committee reads this way:

That a committee of nine, six ministers and three elders, be elected by the general assembly to study the relationship of the OPC to society in general, and to other ecclesiastical bodies in particular, with a view to bringing into the next general assembly recommendations suggesting ways and means whereby the message and methods of our church may be better implemented to meet the needs of this generation and the OPC may have an increasing area of influence and make a greater impact on life today.<sup>31</sup>

Only after six ballots was a full slate elected to this committee, which gives some indication of the importance it had in the estimation of many commissioners. Van Til was elected on the fifth ballot. The other members were ministers Edwin Rian, R.B. Kuiper, Robert Strong, Burton Goddard, and Clifford Smith. The elders were Gordon Clark, C.A. Freytag, and Murray Forst Thompson. According to Lawrence

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translated into the familiar criticisms that OPCs were doctrinal nit-pickers and evangelistically dormant. Along similar lines, the OP attempts at union with the Presbyterian Church in America collapsed in the eighties. Behind the scenes lay the PCA's cultural aspirations. These aspirations are very much at the center of the PCA's identity and rise out of an evangelical social vision of which a large influential, if not dominant, national church is an indispensable part. Historically the OPC has not shared this vision.

<sup>30</sup>Arthur Kuschke points out that, although Van Til was the chief figure in the controversies during the forties, others, such as John Murray, actually carried on the public debate for his position; cf. audio interview, July 23, 1991 (OPC archives).

<sup>31</sup>*Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly*, 24.

Eyres, the driving force behind the idea for this committee was Rian,<sup>32</sup> a Presbyterian elitist who, although he wrote the fine book *The Presbyterian Conflict*,<sup>33</sup> dreamed about the OPC as a large Presbyterian body with the cultural clout of the PCUSA.<sup>34</sup>

Rian dominated the committee and six others agreed with him.<sup>35</sup> Two dissented — Van Til and Thompson. The public debate at the next assembly focused on the fear that if the majority got its way, a super-committee was in the offing, and it would become a permanent bureaucratic feature dominating the church's future.<sup>36</sup> The minority also feared a relaxation of the emphasis upon "the vigorous proclamation of our distinctive faith."<sup>37</sup> In actual fact, the point was whether the OPC was to reclaim a portion of its lost American Presbyterian heritage. But a return to that heritage, under the leadership of a man like Rian, would mean uncritical acceptance of the Presbyterian cultural synthesis. Van Til and Thompson won the assembly with their minority report and the committee was dissolved.

Rian's loss signalled a breach between him and Van Til and significantly between him and some of the other members of the faculty

<sup>32</sup>Lawrence Eyres, "A Minister's Perspective on the Church," an audio tape of a speech delivered at the semi-centennial celebration of the OPC, June 12, 1986 (OPC archives).

<sup>33</sup>There is some evidence that the backbone of Rian's book came from Machen himself. According to Everett C. DeVelde, Sr., Machen was working on a document entitled "The Conflict" the last summer of his life. The question is, what became of the manuscript? Cf. DeVelde's "A Memorial to Doctor John Gresham Machen," January 3, 1937 (OPC archives).

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Eyres, "A Minister's Perspective on the Church." Also note Rian's emphasis in the final chapter of *The Presbyterian Conflict*; his hope is ". . .to alleviate the deplorable state of the church and bring it back to its place of power and usefulness in the life of America" (rev. ed., 198). For a further statement of Rian's position, see *A Free World: An Exposition of the Freedoms of Man Based on the Moral Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

<sup>35</sup>The question is asked why R.B. Kuiper, a member of the Committee of Nine, stood with the majority. Whatever his reasons, there is no question where he stood as things played themselves out in the forties. He stood solidly with Van Til; cf. Edward Heerema, *R.B.: A Prophet in the Land* (Jordan Station: Paideia Press, 1986), 153f. For the flavor of Kuiper's convictions during this era, see his "What's Right with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church?" *Presbyterian Guardian* 15 (November 25, 1946): 323-324, 333; and 15 (December 10, 1946): 341-343.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. the minority report of the Committee of Nine, *Minutes of the Ninth General Assembly*, 30-33.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. the minority report of the Committee of Nine, *Minutes of the Ninth General Assembly*, 32.

at Westminster Seminary, where he was president of the board of trustees. Still, when the suggestion was made in the mid-forties for the organization of a Christian university, Rian became the general secretary of the association for its development. He had ideas about the university much at variance with the seminary men and many in the OPC. He thought it should stand in the interest of the American Presbyterian cultural line.

Eventually the strain between Rian and the university board became intolerable. According to Robert Marsden, Rian wished to replace the board by stacking the association with those of like mind and by pursuing the position that the association had the authority over the board and could remove the board in its entirety if it so chose.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Lawrence Eyres suggests that there was some question about Rian's use of the association's money.<sup>39</sup> Marsden alluded to this when he wrote:

... Mr. Rian spent time and Association funds in seeking to get people nominated to the Board — people whom it was impossible to demonstrate were more competent to form judgments concerning the University project than the then members of the Board.<sup>40</sup>

Rian was fired in the fall of 1946 by a board vote of eighteen to five.

Later Leslie Sloat, a member with Rian in the Presbytery of Philadelphia, indicated to Rian that he and another presbyter, John Clelland, desired to meet with him about ". . . serious irregularities in his conduct as general secretary of the University Association. . . . Among other things, it appeared that some two hundred and forty persons had been enrolled as members of the Association, without apparently any payment of dues on their part."<sup>41</sup> It was admitted by Marsden in his reflection on the issue that the difficulty could have been a simple bookkeeping error. Sloat's message made it clear, however, that Rian's refusal to meet would mean official involvement by the

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<sup>38</sup>Robert S. Marsden, letter "[t]o the Missionaries of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on the Foreign Field," February 6, 1947 (OPC archives).

<sup>39</sup>Eyres, "A Minister's Perspective on the Church."

<sup>40</sup>Marsden, letter "[t]o the Missionaries of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on the Foreign Field."

<sup>41</sup>Robert S. Marsden, "General Mission Letter No. 5," May 7, 1947 (OPC archives).

presbytery. That very day, April 25, 1947, Rian left the OPC,<sup>42</sup> claiming afterward that he had reread the fourth book of Calvin's *Institutes* and had been convinced that Machen and the OPC were schismatic all along. In repentance he returned to the PCUSA, the church whose cultural elitism he had never left.<sup>43</sup>

The second chapter in Van Til's struggle during the forties involved some of those who had been a part of the Committee of Nine: Robert Strong, Clifford Smith, and Gordon Clark. Rian was also involved but not as directly, since the interests of these men were more evangelical than elitist.

The rise of the broad and modern evangelical movement has been complex. One avenue of approach is to recognize that, although committed to a conservative theology and a traditional morality, this movement has been greatly affected by what it senses to be the current meaninglessness of the notion of the unified, visible church. As a result, it has redefined the historic sense of the word it has claimed. No longer used as descriptive of the visible church as Luther and Calvin employed it, the word "evangelical" speaks about personal commitments in doctrine and life. At root these commitments betray an even more basic devotion to the autonomy of the individual conscience and to voluntarism. It is not without reason that Van Til saw evangelicalism as inherently Arminian.<sup>44</sup>

Modern evangelicalism has been dominated by personality cults and an attitude in which the visible church is obliged to take a backseat to individuals and organizations that best reflect its spirit. In fact, the visible church itself is redefined in terms of an evangelical institution; i.e., it sits at the level of other evangelical organizations, no longer a unique and an absolute obligation, forced to compete for the believer's interest and money.

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<sup>42</sup>See the minutes of the Presbytery of Philadelphia (OPC) for its meeting on May 12, 1947.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. editorial, *Christian Century* (June 25, 1947): 788-789; also Rian's statement "Why I am Re-entering the Ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." (OPC archives), and his reflections on his OP experience in "Theological Conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s in the Presbyterian Church and on the Princeton Seminary Campus," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 5 (November 1984): 216-223.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Van Til's syllabus, "The New Evangelicalism" (n.d., on file in the Van Til collection at Westminster Seminary); note also *Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955). A number of people never forgave Van Til for his attack on modern evangelicalism for its Arminianism. In some ways, a division continues in the OPC between those who agree with his assessment and those who do not.

Culturally, evangelicalism thrives through a synthesis mentality. It is not schizophrenic about the culture, as are the fundamentalists. Neither is it controlled by the aristocratic notion of privilege, as was Rian. Instead, evangelicalism craves acceptance and seeks parity — the place of an equal. It attracts those individuals and institutions that hope to move ably in the secular setting. In the words of Paul Woolley, it likes to read about itself in the newspaper.<sup>45</sup>

It is unfair to say that those in the OPC who represented the evangelical cause in the forties lacked Reformed convictions and a specific commitment to a Reformed understanding of the church. At the same time, they had been influenced by the broad evangelical movement at many points. What they perceived as OPC isolation and contrariness provided opportunity for certain features of that perspective to dominate their thinking.

Events in the second chapter of Van Til's struggle were put in motion in 1940 by the removal of Buswell from the Wheaton College presidency. By 1943 Gordon Clark, the very gifted Christian philosopher who had been teaching at Wheaton, found little sympathy for his Calvinism within the new administration. Without a job, he became the interest of an OP congregation in Philadelphia who wished him for its pastor. Since he was a layman without seminary training, he had to secure certain requirement waivers from the general assembly, which he did at the 1944 assembly.

Prior to that assembly, four ministers, some of whom had been a part of the Committee of Nine majority, caucused for two days on the state of the church. They drafted a "Program for Action" and distributed it to a select group of men on May 11, five days before the assembly.<sup>46</sup> The plan bore striking similarities to the interests of the fundamentalists in the thirties. It pleaded for a return to the theme of true spiritual succession to the PCUSA and for a strong program of evangelism. It opposed what was perceived to be the narrowness of Westminster Seminary and the *Presbyterian Guardian*, and it sought

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<sup>45</sup>"Discontent!" *Presbyterian Guardian* 13 (July 25, 1944): 214; see also John R. Muether's analysis of the evangelical influence on presbyterianism in "Contemporary Evangelicalism and the Triumph of the New School," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50 (1988): 339-347.

<sup>46</sup>See the "Program for Action" in endnote 64, Michael A. Hakkenberg, "The Battle over the Ordination of Gordon H. Clark, 1943-1948," *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 349-350; cf. Edward Heerema, *Whither the Orthodox Presbyterian Church?* (Wyckoff, NJ: published by the author, 1947), 9-10.



official action on the question of the liquor trade. It also favored greater cooperation with the fundamentalist and evangelical worlds. Listed among its "Specific Objectives" was the ordination of Gordon Clark, a figure whom those responsible for the plan thought to be greatly important for the realization of their goals.

The fight was on! Clark was ordained August 9, 1944, but a complaint was filed in the Presbytery of Philadelphia against the ordination process. This complaint found its way to the general assembly in 1945.<sup>47</sup> It argued many things, but chief was the question of Clark's orthodoxy on the matter of the incomprehensibility of God.<sup>48</sup> Clark defended the primacy of the intellect in a way directly at variance with Van Til's formulation of the principle of analogy. He believed God's knowledge incomprehensible in a quantitative sense; that is, God knows infinitely more than man. However, God's knowledge and man's knowledge are of the same kind, of the same quality. Any other position, said Clark, ends in mysticism, if not skepticism.

For Van Til, Clark's position destroyed the Creator-creature distinction. Simply put, according to Van Til, God's knowledge is an extension of the ontological difference between God and man. Therefore, not only a quantitative but a qualitative difference exists between God's knowledge and man's. Man's knowledge is like (analogous to) God's knowledge, but it is not the same.

Still, the larger issue in this debate<sup>49</sup> was whether the OPC would

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<sup>47</sup>*Minutes of the Twelfth General Assembly*, 6-30; the complaint was signed by John W. Betzold, Eugene Bradford, R.B. Kuiper, LeRoy B. Oliver, Ned B. Stonehouse, John Murray, Forst Thompson, William E. Welmers, Paul Woolley, Cornelius Van Til, Edward J. Young, David Freeman, Arthur W. Kuschke, Jr., and Leslie W. Sloat. See also "The Answer to the Complaint. . ." (OPC archives); the answer was signed by Charles A. Tichenor, Robert Strong, Floyd E. Hamilton, Edwin H. Rian, and Gordon H. Clark.

<sup>48</sup>Other matters involved in the debate over Clark's position were the free offer of the gospel and the fiducial aspect of faith, both of which Clark denied; cf. Kuschke, audio interview, July 23, 1991 (OPC archives); see also Fred Klooster's account of the debate on the incomprehensibility issue in *The Incomprehensibility of God Debate in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1951).

<sup>49</sup>By "larger issue" I do not mean to diminish the importance of the theological issue at stake; my purpose is to draw attention to the wider ecclesiastical and cultural questions. Truly, the "incomprehensibility debate" is one of the great theological encounters in the twentieth century because of the issue and the stature of those involved. Efforts to play down this debate have been many, but, according to Arthur Kuschke, nothing less than the proper view of Scripture in relation to logic was in the balance, (audio interview, July 23, 1991 [OPC archives]). John Frame believes that this was a debate in which "[n]either man was at his best," in which "each seriously misunderstood

maintain a course that moved it away from the unfortunate features of American Presbyterianism, even in its evangelical expression, and toward a more Reformed and antithetical identity.<sup>50</sup> Clark had become a front man for the fight to bring the church back to an American Presbyterianism of an evangelical stripe.<sup>51</sup> Once more the cry went up that the OPC was under the thumb of men who represented the Reformed tradition of "other lands." But for these with the ever-so powerful thumb — Van Til, for instance — any alliance with the fundamentalists and evangelicals in the interest of recapturing American society would necessarily employ suspicious means to gain suspect ends; it would land the church back in the soup out of which it had come.

The third and final chapter in the Van Til struggle involved Floyd E. Hamilton. Although the general assembly of 1946 failed to find for the complainants on the doctrinal issue in the Clark case, it did find the procedures of the Presbytery of Philadelphia irregular. Still, Clark's ordination stood, but the mood in the church was tense. The Program for Action did, after all, call for the church to "reset her course" in the interests of American Presbyterianism.

Floyd Hamilton was an able man but a defender of Clark and a determined evidentialist.<sup>52</sup> His appointment to a seminary post in Korea was under review by the OP foreign missions committee. While the committee was willing to send him to Korea as a missionary, it would not approve his appointment to the seminary position there. Those who favored the Committee of Nine majority and the Program for Action, decided to make their stand over the issue of Hamilton's appointment. As a result, two different "slates" were put before the

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the other" (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987], 21ff.). Is Frame right? In addition to the participants in the debate, including Kuschke, many students of Van Til and Clark say no; cf. Mark W. Karlberg, "On the Theological Correlation of Divine and Human Language: A Review Article," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (March 1989): 99-105, esp. 104.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Hakkenberg, *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 329-350.

<sup>51</sup>In the debate Clark was accused of a form of rationalistic hyper-Calvinism. If this accusation is correct, the question that begs for an answer is: How could men such as Robert Strong, Richard Gray, Donald Graham — men who, in their evangelical convictions, distanced themselves from the faintest hint of hyper-Calvinism — align themselves with Clark? The answer is found in the fact that many who supported Clark looked past his theological positions to his symbolic value in the fight for the evangelical agenda.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis for Christian Faith: A Modern Defense of the Christian Religion* (New York: George A. Doran, 1927).

1947 assembly for available positions in the committee for foreign missions.<sup>53</sup>

After two days of debate, the assembly sustained the committee in its position concerning Hamilton by returning to office a majority of those opposed to Hamilton's seminary appointment. The margin of difference was one vote. The defeat was far greater than the margin of difference. Many who favored Hamilton, who stood for the Program for Action and with Dr. Clark and who represented the broad evangelical cause, resigned from their general assembly committee assignments before the end of that assembly. Before the next assembly, most of these men had left the OPC, including Clark.

As sad as these departures were, the hope and promise of the OPC were preserved. Van Til had been the central figure, the representative figure, in the further development of this Presbyterian anomaly that resisted the efforts to make it an extension of American provincialism. Instead, its interests were catholic and Reformed. This is not to say that Van Til triumphed in every respect. There remains the question of his commitment to Abraham Kuyper's program for the reformation of culture,<sup>54</sup> a program that failed to win the church. As a Presbyterian anomaly the OPC stands over against more than an American cultural identity. Essentially, she has been stamped with an other-worldliness and awaits further help as to how she, rather than seeking to regain the world she has lost, might be of service to her Lord in the world.

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<sup>53</sup>Robert Marsden says that the word "slate," which highly politicized the election proceedings, was introduced into the debate by Donald Graham ". . . when he made a strong plea for the defeat of the sitting members and the election of the new ones." Marsden goes on to say, "[Graham's] speech had the virtue of being very frank, and I credit it, humanly speaking, with defeating his slate" ("General Mission Letter No. 6," June 4, 1947 [OPC archives]).

<sup>54</sup>See Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931). This area is in need of more study, since it is obvious that Van Til's amillennialism affected his attitude toward cultural reformation.