

A HALF-CENTURY OF REFORMED SCHOLARSHIP

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CELEBRATING fifty years of anything invites reflection, and we will, I hope, be pardoned for indulging ourselves upon completing the fiftieth volume of a scholarly journal.

The character and purpose of our publication were clearly set forth by its initial editors. Readers who have no access to the first issue may appreciate my quoting the introductory statement in full:

If we are not mistaken (and editors, like others, sometimes make mistakes), more periodicals are dying than are being born at the present time. *The Westminster Theological Journal* in sending out its first issue is, therefore, going against the current of the times. It is doing that in a more important sense, however, than merely by the fact of publication. The *Journal* is founded upon the conviction that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and of practice, and that the system of belief commonly designated the Reformed Faith is the purest and most consistent formulation and expression of the system of truth set forth in the Holy Scriptures.

This position is the position of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, and the *Journal* is edited by two members of that Faculty on behalf of the entire body.

We stand today in the Christian Church as debtors to nineteen centuries of Christian history, thought, and experience. It would not only be futile but wrong to try to dissociate ourselves from the great stream of Christian tradition. Other men laboured and we have entered into their labours. It is only by thorough acquaintance with and appreciation of the labours of God's servants in the centuries that have passed that we can intelligently and adequately present the Christian Faith in the present.

But while we cling tenaciously to the heritage that comes to us from the past we must ever remember that it is our responsibility to present the Christian Faith in the context of the present. The position we maintain, therefore, necessarily involves the bringing of every form of thought that may reasonably come within the purview of a theological Faculty to the touchstone of Holy Scripture and the defining of its relations to our Christian Faith.

The need for a scholarly theological journal in this country to uphold historic Christianity is very great. Certain periodicals that at one time

supplied this need have ceased to exist. Into the breach *The Westminster Theological Journal* aims to enter.

The policy of the *Journal* will be:

1. To maintain the highest standard of scholarship;
2. To publish contributions which will promote the study of theology and the interest of the Reformed Faith;
3. To publish reviews of current literature of importance to the Christian Church and to theological study.

The Faculty is undertaking this task with humility and confidence. They do so with humility because they are aware of the responsibility and of their own insufficiency. Yet they do it with confidence because they believe they are on the side of the truth, and in reliance upon divine grace and power. The battle is the Lord's, and as His is the wisdom and strength so to Him shall be all the glory.

THE EDITORS

Back in 1938, this new publication had neither the financial resources nor the breadth of support to insure its success. In God's providence, however, a truly remarkable group of scholars provided the intellectual and spiritual backing to give *WTJ* an immediate role of leadership in theological thought. Consider these names: Cornelius Van Til in apologetics, John Murray in systematic theology, Edward J. Young in Old Testament, Ned B. Stonehouse in New Testament, Paul Woolley in church history, and R. B. Kuiper in practical theology. Anyone acquainted with the output of these scholars must marvel that such a galaxy of godly and intellectual leaders could have been brought together in one place.

Cornelius Van Til soon became the controversial figure within that group. The element of controversy was not limited to Van Til's insistence that a truly biblical apologetics must be inseparably tied to a distinctly Reformed theology (over against a more broadly conceived evangelical perspective). Even from within the Reformed camp he was perceived by some as a dangerous innovator.¹ This conception of Van Til

¹ Van Til developed his distinctive apologetic method in separate books rather than within the context of *WTJ*, but most of his book reviews clearly reflect that method. Among his articles, the most controversial were those in a series on "Common Grace," published in 1945-46 (see Main Index, nos. 361-63) and reviewed by Sinclair B. Ferguson elsewhere in this issue.

is a little baffling to the present generation of Christian students, who naturally view him as a great stalwart in the defense of orthodox Christianity—and even more so to those of us who were privileged to sit under his teaching and who could see with our own eyes his passion to uphold the Scriptures and to win the world for Christ. In the context of the 1940s, however, Van Til did appear as a theological maverick. Self-consciously, even blatantly, he set forth his own approach to apologetics as one that should supplant B. B. Warfield's method, even though the latter was widely regarded as of a piece with the orthodox faith.

I point out this aspect of Van Til's ministry to correct the false impression that *WTJ* was founded merely to repeat what previous Reformed theologians had taught. As the statement quoted above clearly shows, the original editors saw no contradiction between a tenacious clinging to one's heritage and an aggressive presentation of the faith that takes into account the realities of the present. In the case of Van Til, that commitment meant a mastery of twentieth-century idealism, a thorough immersion in the thought of Karl Barth and other contemporary theologians, and especially the appropriation of Dutch Reformed theology and philosophy, as represented by such thinkers as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Herman Dooyeweerd. Van Til's ability to synthesize the best of the American Presbyterian tradition with the distinctives of Dutch thought, and all in the light of antagonistic philosophical currents, elicits unbounded admiration—and a gasp or two. Though Van Til was not our most frequent contributor, it is arguable that *WTJ* owes most of its influence and distinctiveness to his remarkably original mind. And yet, we would dishonor that very contribution if we sought merely to restate what he taught us instead of further advancing his thought and even, when necessary, correcting it in the light of scriptural teaching.

Accordingly, one detects in the pages of the journal an attempt not to follow Van Til slavishly but to build a consistent Reformed apologetics on the basis of his clearly biblical epistemology. Van Til's younger colleague in the apologetics department at Westminster, Robert D. Knudsen, followed his teacher's lead by mastering Continental thought, in particular

existentialism, and has since sought to subject contemporary theology to a searching critique, utilizing the conceptual tools developed by Calvinistic philosophy.² From a quite different perspective, but also in line with Van Til's determination to interact with anti-Christian thought so as to advance the claims of Christ, John M. Frame (now on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in California) has appropriated the methods of Analytical Philosophy and thus clarified the import of Van Tilian apologetics, particularly in his penetrating reviews.³ One should also mark that Edmund P. Clowney, whose first article for *WTJ* had analyzed philosophical questions related to Hegelianism and Kierkegaard, offered a touching tribute—four decades later—to the significance of Van Til's work for Reformed *preaching*.⁴

Though he was not precisely a controversial figure, we would err grievously with regard also to John Murray if we thought that his teaching and writing ministry could be characterized as a mere theological restatement of previous Reformed thought. His emphasis on biblico-theological exegesis inevitably led him to fresh and, yes, innovative formulations, as is especially clear from his powerful studies on "The Imputation of Adam's Sin."⁵ That his commitment to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was tempered by a higher commitment to Scripture is apparent at various points but becomes explicit and concrete in one of his book reviews: "Biblico-theological study will show that the traditional formulation of covenant theology, especially that associated with the seventeenth century, needs modification."⁶ Because of the significance of systematic theology in the ministry of Westminster, the current issue of the journal carries a special essay by Associate Professor Sinclair B. Ferguson devoted exclusively to a review of our articles in that field.

Edward J. Young was the most erudite scholar of the group. Widely traveled, Young was the quintessential polyglot, able

² See Main Index, esp. no. 167.

³ Cf. esp. nos. 71–72.

⁴ See nos. 27 and 30.

⁵ See nos. 227–30.

⁶ In a review of D. H. Small, *The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism*, in vol. 22 (1959–60) 214–16, esp. p. 216.

to converse freely not only in the standard European languages but also in Modern Hebrew, Arabic, and so on.⁷ Though his writing was not characterized by the originality some of his colleagues displayed, he more than compensated for it through a mastery of vast amounts of information, thoroughness in the details of scholarship, and sheer volume of output. Indeed, Young stands out as the most prolific contributor to *WTJ*, with nearly twenty articles and over ninety books reviewed. The respect with which he was held by scholars outside the evangelical community is reflected in the journal itself, which in 1951 carried a lexical note coauthored by Young and Cyrus H. Gordon.⁸

Young's contributions were nicely complemented by the numerous and more creative essays of Meredith G. Kline. Without weakening for a moment his commitment to the full authority of Scripture, Kline's invigorating studies consistently challenged his readers to think in new ways and to consider fresh options. Unafraid of controversy, Kline argued as early as 1955 that the textual evidence "prevents anyone who follows the analogy of Scripture from supposing that

⁷ Some time after his death, I shared part of the responsibility of going through many of Young's books that had been donated to the Westminster library. Because a large number of these volumes consisted of grammars in various languages, we decided to sort them by language. Before we were finished, we had nineteen different piles (though he was in fact acquainted with some thirty-five to forty languages). Curiously, one of the books contained a slip of paper with his to-do list for a certain day. It is a testimony, not only to his linguistic abilities but even more to his great self-discipline, that this list included, in addition to such mundane matters as the need to polish his shoes, a reminder to review Syriac on that day.

⁸ See no. 93. Gordon had been Young's teacher at Dropsie in the 1930s. The fact that the journal was open to publishing a piece coauthored by a Jewish, non-Christian scholar is indicative of the editors' recognition that Reformed writers are not the only ones who have worthwhile things to say. From time to time the journal has eagerly sought the contribution of specialists who do not necessarily share our theological convictions. Almost thirty years ago the Lutheran scholar Alexander Heidel, an expert in Ancient Near Eastern studies, was asked to review books in his field. To mention but one recent example: Gordon D. Fee, a member of the Assemblies of God and an internationally known figure in the field of NT textual criticism, contributed an important review article in 1979 (see no. 64). In all, 380 individuals—most of them not directly associated with the seminary—make up the fifty-year list of reviewers.

Genesis teaches a creation in the space of six solar days."⁹ The review from which those words are taken also contained a suggestion for reading the days of Genesis in a nonchronological way.¹⁰ Of still greater significance is the way in which most of Kline's essays combined a proven expertise in OT scholarship with the *theological* emphasis distinguishing our tradition.

A plausible argument could be made for the view that Ned B. Stonehouse, more than anyone else, placed his distinctive stamp on the scholarly character of *WTJ*. This evaluation may seem a little strange when one considers that Stonehouse contributed only four essays to the journal, one of them a review article. We should keep in mind, however, that his inaugural lecture on Bultmann (along with four book reviews by other members of the faculty) constituted the very first issue of the journal; that the second volume featured a comparable article by him on Dibelius; and that the more than fifty reviews coming from his pen serve as a model of what a Reformed critique of modern scholarship should look like.

Stonehouse, we must recall, began his career under the shadow of J. Gresham Machen, primary founder of the seminary and probably the leading conservative NT scholar of his day. Machen was what some would call a "pure" scholar: trained in the classical languages by the likes of B. L. Gildersleeve at Johns Hopkins, he attended Princeton Theological Seminary and proceeded to Marburg, where he became fully at home with liberal theology in the first decade of this century. Early in his career he published two incisive articles on the Lucan nativity story, while his later full-scale works demonstrated some remarkable powers of analysis.¹¹ It is truly

⁹ In a review of Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, in vol. 18 (1955-56) 49-55, esp. p. 54.

¹⁰ This argument was developed into an article and published two years later (see no. 138; for Young's critique, see nos. 404-405). The controversy has not gone away. As recently as vol. 49 Davis A. Young—a geologist and the son of E. J. Young—sought to move the discussion even beyond Kline's proposals.

¹¹ The articles (in an unusual move) were reviewed by A. von Harnack, who called them a "sehr gründliche Abhandlung." Machen had critiqued "mit grosser Umsicht" Harnack's own research into the Lucan narratives. While the great German scholar was not persuaded by Machen's arguments,

an intellectual feast to observe Machen—building on his philological mastery of the relevant texts and on his broad familiarity with current scholarly thought—pick away, gently but powerfully, slowly but inexorably, at the arguments of his opponents until only one option remains unscathed: a supernatural explanation for the virgin birth of Christ and for the origin of Paul's religion.

Now Stonehouse, though not Machen's equal in logical powers, inherited his teacher's sense of responsible scholarship. Many evangelicals, I suppose, must have been puzzled that the first issue of *WTJ* should be devoted to such a hostile opponent of historic Christianity as Bultmann—and doubly surprised to see that a Westminster faculty member should take him so seriously. To be sure, Stonehouse's courteous approach did not at all camouflage the antithetical character of his evaluation: if anything, he demonstrated that one need not be caustic to engage in the most fundamental criticism possible.¹² But by his very example, Stonehouse set the proper direction for a scholarly journal: orthodox zeal can never become an excuse for abusive language or intellectual sloppiness. Though popular critiques of non-Christian thought will always play an important role in the life of the church, *WTJ* was committed to a different task: the appropriation of truth wherever it might be found, the avoidance of superficial and facile answers, and the determination—in the words of

he was clearly impressed: "Seine treffliche Studie verdient alle Aufmerksamkeit" (*TLZ* 38 [1913] 7). Machen's most important work, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930), elicited numerous reviews, some of them striking. Burton Scott Easton (in *ATR* 12 [1930] 454–55), though rather offended by Machen's theology, attributed to the author "a very high dialectic ability." A similar point was made by one of the finest American NT scholars, Henry J. Cadbury, in a singularly sympathetic and perceptive review (*Christian Century* 47 no. 9 [March 4, 1931] 307). F. Kattenbusch, in a twenty-page review article devoted to the book (*Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 102 [1930] 454–74), described it as "so ernsthat, so umsichtig, so klug in seinen Erwägungen, dass es unbedingt als eine bedeutsame Leistung anerkannt werden muss" (p. 454).

¹² In this approach he was certainly emulating Machen's method, described by a contemporary as follows: "Dr. Machen has a style of argumentation which is unique, courteous, seemingly mild yet vigorously convincing, giving his opponents nothing on which to stand" (from a review of *The Virgin Birth in The Bible Today*, quoted in a publisher's blurb).

one of Westminster's original faculty, Robert Dick Wilson—not to shirk the difficult question.¹³ In this respect, note should be taken of Stonehouse's successor in the chair of NT, John H. Skilton, whose more than forty reviews emphasized the challenging field of text-critical and linguistic studies.

Furthermore, Stonehouse brought to his task a gift that did not surface in Machen's professional work. Largely because of his Dutch background, no doubt, Stonehouse showed a marvelous sensitivity to the bearing of theological thinking on biblical exegesis. Several of his book reviews, preeminently his discussion of Bultmann's *New Testament Theology*,¹⁴ are sufficient proof of this distinctive, which has produced further fruit in the work of many of his students, including Westminster's own Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.¹⁵

The field of church history accounts for close to one-fourth of the articles listed in the fifty-year index.¹⁶ Though Paul Woolley channeled his energies into areas other than the publication of scholarly articles, he contributed significantly through years of editorial work and especially through the writing of nearly 100 book reviews. W. Stanford Reid, an early alumnus of the seminary and an authority on the Scottish

¹³ It is perhaps the desire to meet these goals that has created the perception, in the minds of some, that *WTJ* is at times unduly harsh on *conservative* writers. One could also argue, however, that our reviewers have occasionally been more generous in their evaluations than was warranted by the facts. To what extent the journal has been successful in meeting its goals must be left for others to judge.

¹⁴ See vol. 15 (1952–53) 147–56.

¹⁵ Note in particular his methodological reflections in no. 81 and his perceptive article in review of H. Ridderbos's *Paul*, no. 80.

¹⁶ Approximately half of all the articles deal with biblical studies, the majority of which consist of exegetical discussions of specific passages (cf. the Scripture Index). Articles in the area of systematic theology number more than fifty, while more than thirty deal with apologetics. Because *WTJ* is addressed primarily to scholarly (rather than specifically pastoral) concerns, articles in the area of practical theology are relatively few. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that practical theology cannot be divorced from the other theological disciplines, as though scholarly activity were impractical or as if practical theology were nonintellectual. Approximately twenty articles belong in this field, covering such subjects as counseling, prayer, preaching, worship, missions, and so forth (cf. the Subject Index). On the relationship of theology to the missionary enterprise, see especially H. M. Conn's inaugural lecture, no. 35.

Reformation, contributed a dozen essays over a period of thirty-seven years (1943 to 1980). A wide diversity of articles, covering all periods of church history (but with strong emphasis on the Reformation and on American Presbyterianism) and often overlapping with the concerns of systematic theology, have further enhanced the pages of the journal.

A recent evaluation of *WTJ* by someone outside the seminary's constituency quotes a portion of the original editors' statement of purpose and goes on to say:

Under the tutelage of the original faculty-editors, the *Journal* fulfilled this aim admirably in terms of its contributors' erudition, diction, and use of scholarly methods consonant with their interpretation of the Bible. Nowhere was the scholarship better exhibited than in the range of books and authors reviewed. Like its ancestral Princeton journals, the *Westminster Theological Journal* saw a major part of its calling as the surveying of every shifting current of doctrine from its rock of orthodoxy, treating each view fairly and answering it decisively.¹⁷

And, though otherwise critical of certain features of the journal, the reviewer has certainly understood just what motivated those first editors: "Their aim was to defend their faith with a scholarship able to challenge all comers and to command the respect and attention of foes as well as the faithful."

¹⁷ Howard J. Happ in *Religious Periodicals of the United States: Academic and Scholarly Journals* (ed. Charles H. Lippy; New York: Greenwood, 1986) 534–38, esp. p. 536. The writer goes on to add that "the answers will strike many as unsatisfactory and perhaps more as uncharitable." He also comments that "from 1960 on articles become more narrowly confessional in their scope and interest" and that after the death of E. J. Young and the retirement of P. Woolley "the scope of the reviews narrowed noticeably." According to my rough calculations, reviews of books dealing with the OT amount to about 14% of the total, NT 24%, Bible as a whole 5%, systematics 18%, church history 19%, apologetics 10%, practical theology 9%, general 1%. A comparison between vols. 1–25 and vols. 26–50 shows a significant increase in books related to the OT and a decrease in the area of systematics. To what extent these figures simply represent the publishing market is difficult to say. I should add that a large proportion of the books could easily be assigned to more than one category; the figures should perhaps not be taken too seriously.

We conclude this first half-century with the prayer that, should our Lord tarry, *WTJ* will continue faithful to that call in the decades to come.

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