

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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## Reflections on the Christian Apologetics of Gordon H. Clark

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I'm going to focus today pretty exclusively on Gordon Clark's epistemology. Clark believed Christian apologetics must address not only matters of theological prolegomena (the existence and nature of God, the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the historicity of Biblical persons and events, especially of Jesus Christ and His bodily resurrection, *etc.*) but also the implications of the Christian faith—that is, the teaching of Scripture on—every aspect of human life, private and public, personal and social. For he believed that Scripture does have implications for all aspects of life, and that because it does, it is important to defend those implications against attacks just as it is to defend what most would see as its more prominent doctrines. He wrote over 40 books (including a systematic theology the manuscript of which was only discovered in about the last year, which his grandson now hopes to get published and which I expect I shall read with great relish), many articles, and many lectures, addressing every branch of philosophy, plus history, various divisions of natural science, economics, ethics, politics, and more, and though I personally find everything he wrote fascinating, it would be impossible to treat the broad spectrum of his thought even tolerably, let alone well, in a single short lecture.

For this lecture, therefore, I think it most profitable to confine ourselves to his epistemology, which is probably the aspect of his thought that has been the most divisive in broader Christian circles

because of his *presuppositionalism*, and in narrower Reformed circles because of his disagreements with and critiques of the epistemologies of Herman Dooyeweerd and, more prominently and importantly in American Reformed circles, Cornelius Van Til.

I will not try to document all or even many of my descriptions of Clark's thought by specific quotations from his work. I've written this lecture as one who studied Clark intently for about fifteen years, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, but whose attention has for the last dozen years or so been on quite different matters. So instead what I'll give you here is more what I as a serious student of Clark perceive on reflection at some distance to have been the most important epistemological lessons I learned from him. It is entirely possible, therefore, that some of what I say might more accurately describe his impact on my thinking than his own thinking *per se*. If that is so, it won't be the first time a great thinker's disciple has succumbed to some revisionism—not even the first time for a disciple of a famous Reformed presuppositionalist.

### Part One: Clark's Presuppositionalism

I shall begin with Clark's presuppositionalism in the most basic, general terms, with particular attention to its relevance to his understanding of what knowledge is, and with what I hope will calm the anxieties of some who think his theory of knowledge leaves them with precious little understanding of the world around them or even of themselves.

By *knowledge* Clark meant *justified true* belief; by *justified*, he meant belief that was either axioms or propositions validly deduced from axioms.

Therefore, in Clark's epistemology, *knowledge* is limited to axioms and their logical implications.

As an aside, it is common for some Reformed apologists to think that Reformed presuppositionalism is unique, or nearly so, in embrace of this view of the justification of knowledge. It is not, however. My own first exposure to presuppositionalism, though not by that name, was in a philosophy course taught by the late Dr. Dallas Willard at the University of Southern California (who later mentored Greg Bahnsen toward his Ph.D. in philosophy and had a strong influence on many other apologists of Greg's and my generation). Dr. Willard assigned us to read Catholic philosopher Roderick Chisholm's *The Problem of the Criterion*, which was a brilliant, short demonstration that without undefended axioms as starting points, reasoning could never get started, and therefore no conclusion could be justified. It wasn't until about a decade later, when I first began reading Clark and a few other Reformed presuppositionalists, that I recognized their presuppositionalism as one variety of the axiomatic epistemology Chisholm represented.

Clark's axiom (using the singular collectively) was the Word of God, *i.e.*, Clark's axioms, using the plural specifically, are the thoughts of God, which so far as man's access to them is concerned (for God surely has thoughts that He has not revealed to us—indeed, He has told us so<sup>1</sup>) are the content of the Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety in its original autographs (to borrow the language of the original doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Theological Society, of which Clark was one of the founders).

It follows that in Clark's epistemology, we know nothing but what the Bible says or logically implies.

But we must be careful not to misunderstand Clark. Many think Clark's epistemology implies the rejection of science, history, engineering, *etc.*, as valueless, other than such as might be explicitly or implicitly revealed in Scripture. Some go farther and think Clark was an idealist who denied the objective reality of the external world. Neither is so—as Clark's quite broad and deep acquaintance and fascination with botany, history, and economics, among other disciplines—demonstrated. While Clark did say those yielded no *knowledge*—justified true belief—they were still useful. They could yield *opinions* that, when acted upon, could be more or less effective at achieving various ends. When he spoke of *knowledge*, he distinguished it, as did Plato, from *opinion*.

Knowledge is by definition both *true* belief and *justified* belief. Opinions, by contrast, might be either true or false, but even when true could not be *justified*, that is, even if they were true, we couldn't *know* them to be true. *I.e.*, they would not constitute part of our knowledge.

It is important also to understand what Clark meant when he said a belief was *justified*. He didn't mean that it was a belief lots of people would agree with, or even a belief that, when acted upon, could lead to useful practice; he meant it was a belief that followed by valid inference from true axioms known to be true, that is, the axioms of Scripture.

Thus, for example, Clark would call *knowledge* the belief that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons yet one God—the Trinity—because that was validly deduced from propositions in Scripture.

However, he would call *opinion* my belief, upon looking to my left at a street curb and seeing a car 30 feet away coming toward me at 45 mph, that I would put my life at risk if I stepped out into the street. That opinion might be true, and if I acted upon it I'd probably be safer than if I didn't, but it would not be *knowledge*, because it would not have been deduced from the axioms of Scripture.

Some would protest, however, that this belief was justified by inference from my sensory perception of the car 30 feet away coming at 45 mph and my direct past experience, or others' direct past experience communicated to me by their testimony, of what happens when someone is hit by a car traveling at that speed and of the very low probability that a driver would be able to stop or swerve in time to miss me if I were to step out in front of him.

Clark would respond, I suspect (It is my opinion; I cannot claim to *know* it.) that while the *opinion* was justified as an *opinion* (a belief that, whether true or false, could still be the basis of practical judgment), it still would not deserve the label *knowledge*, because (a) it wasn't validly deduced from axioms, and (b) the premises from which it was derived, whether validly or invalidly, were not *known* to be true.

Clark sought to persuade people of this through his many critiques of empiricism. In the case of this illustration, he could point out that I couldn't be sure that I wasn't dreaming this, or that I wasn't hallucinating, or that there wasn't some large mirror placed just to my left that was reflecting a car actually coming from my right, or that my calculation of the car's speed was mistaken, *etc.* (I experienced a similar mistaken perception while driving up the California

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<sup>1</sup> *Deuteronomy 29:29; Romans 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 16.*

coast in my youth. Having been on the road for about 13 hours, and it by then being late at night, I suddenly perceived a locomotive barreling toward me just ahead and realized with terror that I was about to miss a curve to the right in the highway and crash into the train. I swerved just in time to make the curve—and then realized, as I came fully awake, that what I’d seen had been a billboard. At least to this day I think it was a billboard. That is my opinion. There were, or at least I think I perceived that there were, lots of trees around and obscuring it. Perhaps I dreamed the whole thing. I didn’t go back to check. I just drove on the next couple of miles into Eureka, quite shaken but very much awake, and stopped to rest.)

What people object to when Clark insists that *knowledge* is limited to the propositions in Scripture and valid deductions from them is a caricature—the notion that this means we’re left with nothing but nearly comprehensive skepticism, and so we never believe anything, and never act on our beliefs in anything, other than the propositions of Scripture and valid deductions from them. Clark, however, simultaneously affirmed his epistemology and chose to eat the scrambled eggs on his plate rather than the plate. He was content with life in a world in which we act on many beliefs that are opinions, not knowledge, and there’s nothing wrong with doing that—indeed, it is unavoidable, and often enough it serves our ends tolerably effectively.

That those who represent Clark as rejecting the value of all sources of *opinion* other than Scripture misunderstand him is demonstrable (insofar as any opinion is demonstrable—a qualifier that should bring to our attention the fact that words have a range of meaning; what I mean by “demonstrable” in this case is similar to but not identical to what I’d mean by saying that the doctrine of the Trinity is demonstrable; the doctrine of the Trinity is demonstrable by valid deduction from the propositions of Scripture; this opinion is demonstrable in a weaker sense of the word, weaker precisely because the propositions in an argument leading to it are not part of Scripture; so please keep that in mind if either Clark or I sometimes say we “know” that, for instance, George Washington was the first President of the United States, even though that’s not revealed in Scripture, for even the word *know* has a range of meanings, and which meaning it has in a given instance must be determined by its context)—

That those who represent Clark as rejecting the value of all sources of *opinion* other than Scripture

misunderstand him is demonstrable by the fact that although he insisted that experience yields no *knowledge*, he often wrote quite clearly of the value of experience and some opinions derived from it (such as many facts<sup>2</sup> of botany, a subject he loved)—a value that stopped short of qualifying them as *knowledge*, it is true, but nonetheless a value. (A \$100 bill is not valueless merely because it is not a \$1,000 bill.)

For example, in his critique of Logical Positivism in his *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, having pointed out that Logical Positivism stipulated that “a sentence is meaningful, as opposed to being nonsense, only if it is verifiable by sensory experience” (which, by the way, he did point out was self-refuting and therefore not true) he then wrote, explaining the *meaning* of verifiability: “For a long time the assertion ‘The other side of the Moon has no mountains’ could not be actually verified or falsified; but it was meaningful [to proponents of Logical Positivism] because it was verifiable in principle. A few people have now seen the other side of the Moon, and their experience discovers whether the assertion is true or false.”<sup>3</sup> That second sentence would be inconsistent with the belief that experience is of *no* epistemic value, but it is consistent with the belief, which was Clark’s, that experience is of epistemic value as evidence for or against *opinion*, even if not as evidence for or against *knowledge*.

Some people have called Clark’s epistemology Fideism and have thought that was sufficient to debunk it. On the one hand, Clark embraced the label, though he preferred the confessedly pejorative term *Dogmatism* because it “is a pointed term that pricks one’s attention.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Clark rejected the meanings usually attached to *Fideism*.

Popular opinion often views Fideism as arbitrary—one believes something regardless whether it is reasonable to do so, even, perhaps, precisely because it is *unreasonable* (as, for instance, in Søren Kierkegaard’s insistence that becoming a Christian requires a blind leap of faith).

Much scholarly opinion holds that Fideism is, as Alvin Plantinga put it, “exclusive or basic reliance

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<sup>2</sup> Notice by the way, that the word *fact* also has a range of meaning—a fact of Scripture being a proper object of *knowledge*, but a fact of botany being a proper object only of *opinion*.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (1973), in *The Works of Gordon H. Clark*, volume 4, *Christian Philosophy* (Trinity Foundation, 2004), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, 19.

upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth,” a reliance that “may go on to disparage and denigrate reason.”<sup>5</sup>

Clark, however—because he rejected the popular definition of faith as something *extra-* or *contra-rational* and believed instead (because he was convinced Scripture defined the term this way<sup>6</sup>) that faith is *assent to an understood* proposition—rejected both definitions of Fideism. For Clark, faith and reason are neither contrary nor logically unrelated; rather, reason starts with faith. With Augustine, he would say, *Credo ut intelligam*, “I believe in order that I might understand.”<sup>7</sup>

But be careful. This doesn’t mean one starts with faith, which is devoid of understanding, and progresses to understanding. Rather, faith being assent to an understood proposition, “I believe in order that I might understand” means “I believe some things that I understand (e.g., the explicit propositions of Scripture), in order that from them I may come both to understand and believe other things (i.e., propositions validly deduced from Scripture) that for now I don’t understand, and even in order that I might come to understand and believe yet other things that are matters of opinion because not deduced from Scripture.” That is, believing the axioms of Scripture not only leads, in the inquisitive mind, to believing those axioms’ logical implications, but also to believing other things about the external world not revealed in Scripture. The first category of beliefs Clark called *knowledge*; the second, *opinion*.

Granted Clark’s definition of faith as assent to an understood proposition, Fideism by definition cannot be extra- or contra-rational. The word is derived from the Latin *fides*, belief, faith, trust, from *fido*, I believe, I have faith, I trust; the translation of the Greek *pisteuo*, I believe, I have faith, I trust.

Thus I think that Fideism, for Clark, simply meant *presuppositionalism*, that is, the belief that all valid reasoning, and hence all knowledge, begins with starting points, propositions logically prior to which

there are none because that is the definition of starting points.

To believe that the Bible is the Word of God is not arbitrary, for the Bible claims to be the Word of God. No argument has ever successfully refuted that claim, and while other starting points, such as Empiricism and Rationalism or dependence on other alleged divine revelations, fail to deliver knowledge, taking the Bible as axiomatic yields a great deal of knowledge. And coupling that knowledge with opinion that we gain by other means, taking the Bible as axiomatic yields also a great deal of highly defensible opinion about such things as history, chemistry, astronomy, economics, art, and music.

So for Clark Fideism is not arbitrary. Neither does Fideism require disparaging reason. On the contrary, Fideism alone provides the starting points without which reason is fruitless, i.e., yields no justified true beliefs, no knowledge.

Clark did not defend Scripture as axiomatic, if by *defend* we mean to present a positive case for it from something outside itself. That would be a contradiction in terms. Axioms are starting points, and by definition there is nothing earlier in a chain of reasoning than a starting point.

But while Clark did not defend Scripture as axiomatic, he did defend *his belief* that Scripture is axiomatic, and he did so in two ways.<sup>8</sup>

First, positively, he asserted that Scripture is the Word of God and showed that Scripture contained the propositions from which this assertion could be validly deduced, i.e., showed that Scripture asserted itself, in some instances explicitly and in others implicitly, as the Word of God and therefore axiomatic.

Second, to answer objections against this axiom, he argued in two ways. The first was to argue that every alternative starting point for epistemology failed to justify any belief. This was the use of his critiques of both rationalism and empiricism. The second was to argue that no proposition either explicit in Scripture or validly deduced from it could be demonstrated to be false, and therefore all attempts to demonstrate that Scripture failed as an axiom also failed. That left Scripture undefeated.

Clark also believed, however—because he thought Scripture taught this—that one’s belief that Scripture is God’s Word, i.e., that it is axiomatic, could come

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<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (editors), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Trinity Foundation, 1990). Now in *What Is Saving Faith? – Editor*.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Lord God of Truth* (1986), and Aurelius Augustine, *Concerning the Teacher* (1938), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by John W. Robbins (Trinity Foundation, 1994).

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *God’s Hammer* (Trinity Foundation, 1987).

about only by the enlightening action of the Holy Spirit, not as a result of a chain of reasoning. And this, again, he believed because he thought Scripture taught it. In commenting on the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.5, he acknowledged that archaeology could contribute something “toward proving that...the historical events...of the Bible are true,” though “little or nothing toward proving that the doctrines” are. (Notice, by the way, how his wording there—that archaeology could contribute something “toward proving that...the historical events...of the Bible are true”—militates against the misapprehension that he thought extra-Biblical grounds for belief were valueless. But to go on:) “How then can we know that the Bible is true?” he asked. “The *Confession* answers, ‘Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of the Scripture] is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit.’ Faith is a gift or work of God. It is God who causes us to believe: ‘Blessed is the man whom thou chooseth and causeth to approach unto thee’ (Psa. 65:4).”<sup>9</sup> Notice, by the way, that when Clark here says “Faith is a gift...of God” he means, as the context makes clear, specifically *this* faith, namely, faith that the Bible is God’s Word. He affirms the same elsewhere of faith in the Gospel, but he would not say it of faith generically, for, *e.g.*, faith that if we rid ourselves of all desire we shall experience nirvana and be absorbed into Brahman is faith in a falsehood.

So for Clark, all knowledge—all justified true belief—consists of our believing propositions either explicit in or validly deduced from Scripture. Opinions are all other propositions that we believe, some of which might be true though we can never know them to be true, and some of which undoubtedly are false. Opinions *invalidly* deduced from Scripture might be true, but our invalid deduction doesn’t entail our knowing them to be true. They might also of course be false. And opinions deduced from other sources—experience, secondhand testimony, authority, *etc.*—might also be true, but again we cannot know them to be true.

But that’s okay. We still manage to muddle through a great deal of life based on opinion.

One hopes, however, for a more sure foundation for our beliefs about God, sin, and salvation than either Empiricism or Rationalism (let alone Existentialism and other forms of Irrationalism!), and thankfully Scripture gives that to us. As Peter put it,

“we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.... And we have something *more sure*, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:17, 19–21).

## **Part Two: The Clark/Van Til Controversy**

What I have said thus far will probably encounter little resistance among most Reformed presuppositionalists, perhaps with the exception of Clark’s definition of faith (which I know is controversial, but which I believe most critics badly misunderstand—and I invite them to tangle with Clark’s careful, thorough, and detailed discussion and critique of the various alternative definitions of faith in his book *Faith and Saving Faith*). I turn now to more controversial ground, namely, his objections to what I have come to designate “Cornelius Van Til’s epistemological idiosyncrasies.” Here, I expect I will step on some toes. If yours are among them, I beg your patience, your forgiveness, and your readiness to reassess.

Years ago I read the complete OPC General Assembly and Philadelphia Presbytery minutes related to what became and still is known as the Clark/Van Til controversy. I also read various histories of the controversy. One was written pretty much contemporaneously with it as a series of articles by the theologian Herman Hoeksema in the *Standard Bearer*, the magazine of the Protestant Reformed Church, which later were republished as the book *The Clark-Van Til Controversy*.<sup>10</sup> Another of the more important ones was the chapter on it in John Frame’s *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*.<sup>11</sup> In preparing for this lecture, I reviewed these and the discussions of the Clark/Van Til controversy in Greg Bahnsen’s *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*<sup>12</sup> and John R.

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<sup>10</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Trinity Foundation, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> John N. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P&R Publishing, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (P&R Publishing, 1998).

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* rev. ed. (Presbyterian and Reformed, [1956] 1965), 17, 18.

Muether's *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*.<sup>13</sup>

I am now about to disappoint many, probably most, perhaps all of you. But if you are, as I expect you will be, disappointed by what I am about to say, I ask you to think soberly about why you are disappointed.

How am I going to disappoint you? By declining to rehearse the controversy in depth, to assess the arguments pro and con, and to seek to justify my judgments of the two protagonists'—or antagonists', depending on your point of view—positions and their arguments for them.

Instead I will sketch the controversy only very briefly, even superficially and indicate my conclusions about it, with little attempt to justify those conclusions. Why? For two reasons: First, because godly men who have studied the controversy in much greater depth than I have argued about it a great length and still have failed to persuade each other, and I don't think I can, even in a major treatment, let alone a brief lecture like this, do any better than they. Second, because after doing this I want to conclude by addressing something I consider to be much more important to the health of Christ's Church.

So, here's my sketch of the controversy. I understand it to have been largely, though not exclusively, over Van Til's doctrines that all human knowledge is exclusively *analogical* of God's knowledge, and that all truth is necessarily *paradoxical*.

The first challenge is to understand rightly what Van Til meant by these two terms, and that is admittedly quite a challenge. Van Til's defenders and critics alike acknowledge that he often expressed himself in ways that others, even intelligent and well studied, found very difficult to understand.

Bahnsen, for instance, could write of "the tremendous philosophical and linguistic confusion (on all sides) that has swirled around the debate."<sup>14</sup>

Frame could write at the end of his survey of the controversy, "It is time for us to admit that these issues should never have been raised in such confusing terminology..."<sup>15</sup>

Let us begin with the doctrine that man's knowledge is always *analogical* to God's. I'll start by offering some standard explanations of *analogy*.

The clearest and most precise discussion of *analogy* I have seen occupies 11 pages of H.W.B. Joseph's *Introduction to Logic*, of which the following statements are helpful excerpts, though they leave out a great deal:

Analogy meant originally identity of relation. Four terms, when the first stands to the second as the third stands to the fourth, were said to be analogous, or to exhibit an analogy. If the relation is really the same one in either case, then what follows from the relation in one case follows from it in the other; provided that it really follows from the relation and from nothing else.... [e.g.] If in respect of weight  $a : b :: c : d$ , and if  $a$  weighs twice as much as  $b$ , then  $c$  must weigh twice as much as  $d$ ....

There is however another sense in which the terms *analogy* and *argument from analogy* are used. The analogy may be any resemblance between two things, and not merely a resemblance of the relations in which they respectively stand to two other things; and the argument from analogy is an argument from some degree of resemblance to a further resemblance, not an argument from the consequences of a relation in one case to its consequences in another. Expressed symbolically the argument hitherto was of the following type:  $a$  is related to  $b$  as  $c$  is to  $d$ ; from the relation of  $a$  to  $b$  such and such a consequence follows, therefore it follows also from the relation of  $c$  to  $d$ . The present argument will run thus:  $a$  resembles  $b$  in certain respects  $x$ ;  $a$  exhibits the character  $y$ , therefore  $b$  will exhibit the character  $y$  also....<sup>16</sup>

Distinct from these uses is that of analogy specifically in theology, where analogy is thought to provide a sort of halfway house between univocal and equivocal language about God. Some theologians have thought the Creator/creature distinction implies that no quality predicated of God can be identical to that quality predicated of anything else, and therefore they have asserted that univocal language about God is necessarily false. Yet to confine ourselves to equivocal language about God is in fact to say nothing about Him. It has been thought, therefore, that some middle way must be taken, and that way has been called analogy, and a theological statement has been

<sup>13</sup> John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (P&R Publishing, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 226 n. 151.

<sup>15</sup> Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> H.W.B. Joseph, *Introduction to Logic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition ([1916] reprint edition, Paper Tiger, 2000), 532–542.

held to be an analogy if it is neither wholly univocal nor wholly equivocal.<sup>17</sup> The objection to this has been that it either admits of *some* univocal elements in propositions about God, or it excludes *all* such; if it excludes *all* such, then it seems gratuitous to say that the propositions are anything less than wholly equivocal. Consequently, philosophers like Clark and theologians like Robert Reymond insist that for any analogy actually to communicate something true about God (or anything else), there must be some element of univocalness in it, *i.e.*, some quality that may be attributed as truly to one member of the analogy as to the other.

Now let us contrast these senses of *analogy* with Van Til's—or at least with various attempts to define Van Til's.

Bahnsen, whose massive *Van Til's Apologetic* is the most thorough study and determined defense of Van Til's thought, having written "that Van Til speaks of human knowledge as being 'analogical' of God's knowledge," immediately added, "This may not be a familiar way of speaking," and in a footnote wrote: "From a pedagogical perspective, I would not have preferred to use this kind of summary tag-word for what Van Til was trying to teach. Although it is certainly possible to understand what he meant by the expression, this way of speaking probably occasioned more avoidable misunderstanding and misrepresentation from a small circle of critics than anything else he wrote."<sup>18</sup> Forgive me if I take Bahnsen's "From a pedagogical perspective, I would not have preferred to use this kind of summary tag-word" as meaning approximately, "If Van Til's intent was to teach, this expression was bound to fail."

In his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til wrote of his doctrine of analogical knowledge this way: "If then every fact that confronts me is revelational of the personal and voluntary activity of the self-contained God, it follows that when I try to think God's thoughts after him, that is to say, when...I try to make a 'system' of my own, my system will...at every point be analogical of the system of God.... On the other hand, since the human mind is created by God and is therefore in itself naturally revelational of God, the mind may be sure that its system is true and corresponds on a finite scale to the system of God.

***That is what we mean by saying that it is analogical to God's system. It is dependent upon God's system, and by being dependent upon God's system it is of necessity a true system.***"<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, in his Introduction to Benjamin Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Van Til wrote, "When the Christian restates the content of Scriptural revelation in the form of a 'system,' such a system is based upon and therefore *analogous* to the 'existential system' that God himself possesses. Being based upon God's revelation it is on the one hand, fully true and, on the other hand, at no point identical with the content of the divine mind."<sup>20</sup>

Muether, in a paper written for the OPC Presbytery of the South in 2009, offered this explanation: "By analogy (or analogical knowledge) Van Til set forth the Reformed principle of humanity reinterpreting experience by thinking God's thoughts after him."<sup>21</sup> He described man's knowledge as "derivative or *analogical*," apparently as if the former term were in this context synonymous with the latter.

Both Bahnsen and Muether also wrote of Van Til's concept of analogy as expressing the difference between God's knowledge as *archetypal* and man's as *ectypal*. To quote only Muether, "God contains certain capacities and characteristics in himself. He alone is the archetype. Humanity, as created in the image of God, enjoys a derivative, creaturely, yet genuine existence. We are the *ectype*. Our *being* is derivative: we are the image of God. And our *knowledge* is derivative. We do not possess *archetypal* knowledge but rather *ectypal* knowledge."

As an implication or corollary of this, Van Til held that God's knowledge and man's knowledge "coincide at no point *in the sense that* [the emphasis is Bahnsen's] in his awareness of [the] meaning of anything, in his mental grasp or understanding of anything, man is at each point dependent upon a *prior act* of unchangeable understanding and revelation on the part of God."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1949, 1952), 101, cited in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 251, emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> Cornelius Van Til, "Introduction," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, by Benjamin B. Warfield (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 33, emphases added.

<sup>21</sup> John R. Muether, "Robert Reymond and Cornelius Van Til: Some Reflections," a paper for the Candidates and Credentials Committee of the Presbytery of the South of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, unpublished, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 165, cited in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 226, emphases Bahnsen's.

<sup>17</sup> A clear and concise summary of the matter is in Frederick Ferré's "Analogy in Theology" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 4 volumes, edited by Paul Edwards (Macmillan, 1967), 1:94–97.

<sup>18</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 224–225, 225 note 147.

Clark and others have criticized Van Til on this not for saying that man's knowledge is dependent on God's, not for saying that man's knowledge is necessarily incomplete (finite) while God's is complete (infinite), not for saying that God's and man's acts of knowing are qualitatively different (God knows all instantly, eternally, exhaustively, and intuitively because He knows Himself, while man learns things gradually, over time, partially, and discursively) (to all of which all agree), but for saying that God's knowledge and man's "coincide at no point." I find it difficult to understand why Van Til would define the phrase "coincide at no point" as meaning that one's knowledge is dependent on another's. I might, for instance, say that I had learned from my statistician friend Ross McKittrick that a HAC-robust statistical analysis of weather balloon and satellite global temperature measurements from 1960 through 2012 indicated that there was no trend from 1960 to 1977 and none from 1977 to 2012 but only a stepwise upward shift in late 1977 consequent to a shift in the Pacific Decadal Oscillation from negative to positive<sup>23</sup> and therefore that my knowledge of that was derivative of his, but I wouldn't conclude therefore that my knowledge and his "coincide at no point," and I doubt that it would occur to any of you to say likewise of anything you have learned from anyone else.

It would be natural to think, "But Van Til clarifies by saying *in the sense that...* man is at each point dependent upon a *prior act* of unchangeable understanding and revelation [by] God." But in the *Complaint* against Clark's ordination, Van Til and his co-authors wrote specifically that God's knowledge and man's do not "coincide at a single point," that a proposition does not "have the same meaning for man as for God," that man's knowledge is "analogical to the knowledge God possesses, but it can never be identified with the knowledge" God "possesses of the same proposition,"<sup>24</sup> and that "Man could not have the same thought content in his mind that God has in his mind..."<sup>25</sup>

Various writers have sought to defend Van Til by interpreting him differently from Clark.

<sup>23</sup> Ross R. McKittrick and Timothy J. Vogelsang, "HAC robust trend comparisons among climate series with possible level shifts," *Environmetrics* 25(7) (November 2014), 528–547.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Clark's *Response to the Complaint*, which in turn is cited in Hoeksema's *The Clark–Van Til Controversy*, 9–10.

<sup>25</sup> Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 184, cited in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 227.

Bahnsen, for instance, calls Van Til's use of the term *thought content*, in denying that man can have "the same thought content in his mind that God has in his mind," a "vague expression" that "has played havoc in many a theological and philosophical dispute," adding, "its ability to generate confusion was conspicuous in the Clark–Van Til controversy," and then offers this explanation: "I believe that by 'thought content' Van Til meant the *thinking activity* in which the mind of God engages, which mental 'experience'...is metaphysically different from the operations of man's mind."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps. But one wonders whether it is really so difficult to distinguish between "thought content" and "thinking activity" as to necessitate the misunderstanding and confusion with which many learned scholars have interpreted Van Til. In years past I have often thought that George Washington was the first President of the United States; as I write now, I am thinking that again. As I understand it, my "thought content" is the proposition "George Washington was the first President of the United States," and that proposition was the same ten years ago that it is now, but my "thinking activity," or act of thinking that proposition, today is not the same "thinking activity" that occurred ten years ago.

Bahnsen argued that Van Til's denial that man can have "the same thought content in his mind that God has in his mind" refers exclusively to the (subjective) *thinking activity of God* and the (subjective) *thinking activity of man*. He likened this distinction to that between the thinking activities of two human beings: "The word [knowledge] can...signify the actual act of knowing as a personal event; in this sense my knowledge (act of knowing) is not identical with your knowledge (act of knowing), just as my driving a car cannot be identical with your driving a car (since we are different 'actors')." Consequently, he wrote, "To say that the Creator's act of knowing does not coincide with the creature's act of knowing should be noncontroversial."<sup>27</sup> Well, yes, it should. It should be so obvious as to be trivial.

Yet "thought content" (which I take to be synonymous with *idea*) and "act of thinking" do not, *prima facie*, seem to mean the same thing, and I'm not at all sure that Bahnsen has interpreted Van Til properly, or that Clark and his other critics have misinterpreted him, as Bahnsen charges.

<sup>26</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 227 note 152.

<sup>27</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 226–227 note 151.



Now before you start trying to figure out how to prove me wrong in my interpretation of Van Til and Bahnsen right, hear me carefully: My intent is not to prove that this or that interpretation of Van Til on this point is right or wrong. It is instead to suggest that this exemplifies an underlying difficulty with Van Til's writing, namely, his proclivity to use terms in non-standard and hence confusing ways. If all Van Til ever meant by calling man's knowledge "analogical" is that it is derivative, *i.e.*, derived from a source outside man and therefore contingent, in contrast to God's, which is original, intuitive, and noncontingent, because it is knowledge of Himself, then no Biblically orthodox theologian should object to the substance of his view.

But, first, if that is the case, then it seems quite inexplicable why so many theologians and philosophers, otherwise able scholars, *both defenders and critics*, have thought Van Til was saying something highly significant and even fairly original in the history of theology, and why so many critics have thought he was saying something at least mildly, perhaps catastrophically, mistaken.

Second, if all Van Til meant by "thought content" was "act of thinking," then Van Til's critics still have a legitimate complaint against his non-standard use of the term *analogical* because it was guaranteed to occasion extensive misunderstanding. The words *analogy* and *analogical*, as used in logic, epistemology, and theology generally, simply have not normally, outside of Van Til and *some* (not all) of his followers, typically meant *derivation* and *derivative* (any more than the phrase *thought content* has meant *act of thinking*). Try as I might, I have found no definition of *analogy* in any English dictionary that even closely resembles, let alone matches, Van Til's. It is permissible for writers to assign special meanings to terms within the confines of their own work, so long as in doing so they make it clear that their sense differs from the standard sense, but so far as I can tell Van Til never acknowledged this about his use of the term *analogical*, and therefore it is understandable that many of his readers would have misunderstood him, thinking he intended something similar, if not identical, to the standard meaning.

Now let us turn to the other point on which Clark (and others, like Reymond) have sharply criticized Van Til, his doctrine of the paradoxical nature of human knowledge. And on this point I shall be brief.

In his *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Van Til wrote, "[Antinomies] [another word for paradoxes] are involved in the fact that human knowledge can

never be completely comprehensive knowledge. Every knowledge transaction has in it somewhere a reference point to God. Now since God is not fully comprehensible to us we are bound to come into what seems to be contradictions in all our knowledge. Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical."<sup>28</sup>

For present purposes I shall only mention in passing that Van Til's inference here from the incompleteness of knowledge to its necessarily being paradoxical seems a *non sequitur*. He seems to offer us a conclusion, "All man's knowledge is paradoxical," and a single (minor) premise, "All man's knowledge is incomplete." In this partial syllogism, the major term is *paradoxical*, the minor *man's knowledge*, and the middle term is *incomplete*. What is missing from the syllogism is the major premise, which, for the argument to be valid, would have to be, "All incomplete knowledge is paradoxical." But that premise is demonstrably false, in that a thinker whose knowledge was limited to only the two propositions *Richard III was a king of England* and *Volleyball is a sporting game* would have incomplete knowledge, but there would be no paradox, no apparent contradiction, between those two parts of his knowledge.

To return to what Van Til wrote: In the same book, he wrote, italicizing for emphasis, "*All teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory.*"<sup>29</sup>

And again: "All the truths of the Christian religion have *of necessity* the appearance of being contradictory.... We do not fear to accept that which has the appearance of being contradictory.... In the case of common grace, as in the case of every other biblical doctrine, we should seek to take all the factors of Scripture teaching and bind them together into systematic relations with one another as far as we can. But we do not expect to have a logically deducible relationship between one doctrine and another. We expect to have only an analogical system."<sup>30</sup>

Clark, Reymond, and others have expressed various criticisms of this idea, among them

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<sup>28</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 9; cited in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Zondervan, 1998), 104.

<sup>29</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 142; cited in Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 165–166; cited in Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 104–105; emphasis added.

- that it assumes that the one who holds it knows everything every human now, in the past, or in the future ever will know and knows that none of them will be able to reconcile the apparent contradictions;
- that “if actually noncontradictory truths can appear as contradictories and if no amount of study or reflection can remove the contradiction, there is no available means to distinguish between this ‘apparent’ contradiction and a real contradiction,”<sup>31</sup> which implies
- that it is impossible to conclude that any doctrine is false by pointing out that it contradicts another doctrine thought to be true, and hence
- that we might as well dispense with theology exams for ordination.

I will not take the time to survey the attempts to interpret and defend Van Til on this point. Let us assume that they are correct.

My point is not that Van Til was wrong about this (though I think he was) and Clark right (though I think he was), but that Van Til’s doctrine of paradox was inherently confusing at best.

And now let me say why I have so emphasized the difficulty of interpreting Van Til on these two doctrines of analogical and paradoxical human knowledge.

It is because of the tragic consequences for Christ’s Church, or at least for one part of it, the Reformed faith, mostly in the United States, and particularly the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. And here I can do no better than to offer you some excerpts from John Frame’s discussion of the Clark–Van Til controversy in his *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*:

In my estimation both the Van Til party and the Clark party had valid scriptural concerns. Van Til was concerned to maintain the Creator-creature distinction in the area of human knowledge. Clark was concerned to protect the integrity of divine revelation: to insure that it could provide a true communication from God to man. The Report [of the General Assembly], which generally favored Van Til [but did not reverse the Presbytery’s ordination of Clark], did, in my opinion, do justice to Clarks’ concern about revealed truth. It repudiated the *Complaint*’s language about

different “meanings” and its denial of “coincidence at a single point.” In this respect, the Report made real progress toward a resolution of the questions.

Did Clark do justice to Van Til’s concerns about the Creator-creature distinction? Probably not, in my view, but *that was due in large measure to the confusing way in which the Van Til party stated the question....*

...had [Clark] been willing to bend [his] prejudice [against formulations dealing with subjective experience] a bit, I see no reason why he could not have affirmed an “experiential” difference between God’s knowledge and man’s. Certainly there was nothing in his theory of knowledge to rule out such a distinction. Indeed, I believe that distinction is implicit in Clark’s point about the “difference in mode” [between God’s knowledge and man’s—God’s being intuitive, man’s discursive].

Frame then offered several suggestions as to how to reconcile Clark’s and Van Til’s thought, some of which I think hold some promise, others of which I find completely unpersuasive.

Next Frame rehearsed Van Til’s later critiques of Clark and defenses of himself, finding in them both strengths and weaknesses. I shall bypass those.

What is crucial, and what I embrace wholeheartedly, is his conclusion:

I must reluctantly conclude that Van Til’s response to Clark in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* sheds more heat than light on the controversy. With the benefit of hindsight, Van Til could have come up with formulae such as I suggested earlier that would have drawn the parties together without compromising anyone’s theological concern. Instead, he went on the offensive, employing the “great gulf” language of antithesis, but with an argument so weak (in both interpretation and criticism) as to be quite unworthy of him.

Here we see Van Til as a movement leader. He was leading his troops against those of Clark with the sharpest antithetical rhetoric, taking no prisoners, admitting not the slightest shade of truth in Clark’s formulations, suggesting that Clark’s entire effort was marred by a false principle.... saying that there were no fundamentals in common between himself and Stuart Hackett; here

<sup>31</sup> Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 105–106.

he turns the same guns on Clark. We shall see this extremely antithetical side of Van Til again. I do believe that when he gets into this sort of mood, his normally powerful intellect often fails him. Van Til is a thinker who is normally capable of making careful, even subtle, distinctions. But in his extreme antithetical mode, he tends to miss the obvious.

This is not Van Til at his best; nor, in my estimation, did Clark's performance represent Clark at his best. Further, their warfare badly divided a denomination that was already very small and could ill afford such disunity. In time, Clark and many of his followers left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. I confess that I am appalled that at the Fiftieth Anniversary celebration of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1986, one speaker lauded the Van Tillian contenders for achieving a great victory for truth. In my opinion, truth was the great loser in the battle. Evidently the only winner was pride, an unjustified pride at that.

The controversy dealt for the most part with rather technical philosophical issues that few of the OPC elders [whether ruling or teaching, I might add] understood very well. Even Clark and Van Til were rather confused about them. Some of their disciples, even down to the present, have continued to prattle away about "qualitative differences," "propositional meaning," "identity of thought-content," "single point of identity," "twofold truth," and the like, without much idea of what they are talking about, but with the sublime assurance that they are right and that those who disagree with them are dangerous heretics. It is time for us to admit that these issues should never have been raised in such confusing terminology, that none of the confusing formulae should be made a test of orthodoxy,<sup>32</sup> and that the Clark controversy was a low point in the life of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and in the ministries of the two major protagonists."<sup>33</sup>

And here is my heartfelt conclusion, after having watched, first as an outsider, then as an insider, and then again as an outsider, some of the squabbles not only about this but also about many other highly technical and extra-confessional issues within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (*James* 3:13–18)

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (*Philippians* 2:1–13)

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<sup>32</sup> As some attempted when the OPC Presbytery of the South in 2009 considered (and, I'm glad to say, approved, though not without considerable controversy) the transfer of Robert L. Reymond's ministerial credentials from the PCA into the OPC. See Muether, "Robert Reymond and Cornelius Van Til: Some Reflections."

<sup>33</sup> Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 103–113.

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