

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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Many Infallible Proofs: The Presuppositional Meaning of Acts 1:3 by Joel R. Parkinson

Editor's note: Joel Parkinson is the pastor of Covenant Bible Church in Alliance, Ohio. Mr. Parkinson has written previously for The Trinity Review – "The Intellectual Triunity of God." Unless otherwise noted, Mr. Parkinson quotes from the New King James Version of the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

*"... He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God."
(Acts 1:3)*

Scripture consistently supports the ideas of presuppositional apologetics. The Bible nowhere proves and everywhere presupposes the existence of God.¹ The Bible nowhere proves and often asserts its own truth and authority. Indeed, the truth

of the Bible and Christianity should not and cannot be formally "proven" by external evidence or argument. Rather, the truth is accepted by faith generated by the conviction of the Holy Spirit for several basic reasons.

No amount of evidence will convince the sinner who is totally unable to believe and repent on his own (*Genesis 6:5, Jeremiah 13:23, Matthew 7:18, John 6:44, 6:65, Romans 3:10-11, 8:7-8, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 4:4*). Nor does empirical evidence ever fully or finally prove anything (*1 Corinthians 1:22-24, 2:9-10*). "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (*2 Corinthians 5:7*). Only the Holy Spirit produces the certainty of faith in the heart of a man through regeneration (*John 3:3, 6:37, 16:8, Acts 16:14*). And only from that stance of faith can a Christian take the propositional truth of the Bible for granted and from there construct a valid world view. That is why the Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (*Proverbs 1:7*). We must begin with the Lord and His Word because in the Lord "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (*Colossians 2:3*).

All this is to say that the truth of Christianity in Scripture is the starting point of knowledge and, as the starting point or axiom, may not be formally demonstrated or proven.

Yet Acts 1:3 seems to counter this otherwise consistent testimony of Scripture. It seems to say

¹ *Romans 1:19-20* is no exception to this. Paul says the knowledge of God "is manifest in them" because man is made in the image of God and therefore has an innate awareness of the divine. "God has shown it to them" by revelation, not by scientific demonstration. And, "His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." This is no teleological argument for the existence of God - which is presumed - but recognition that the image of God in man naturally leads him to discern God's power and providence in the world. This leaves the rebellious unbeliever who suppresses this obvious truth "without excuse."

that the visible evidence of Jesus Christ's resurrection is what proved decisive to the faith of the apostles. Indeed, for a long time *Acts* 1:3 troubled me as a confirmed presuppositionalist. How could I defend presuppositionalism against the near universal interpretation of *Acts* 1:3 that the appearances of Jesus Christ were "*infallible proofs*" of His resurrection?

The problem bothered me enough that I finally buckled down to study *Acts* 1:3 thoroughly for myself. I confess that I approached the issue with the presupposition that the popular interpretation of *Acts* 1:3 is wrong. I was not surprised that, when I dug deeper into the text and context, the evidential or empirical understanding of *Acts* 1:3 evaporates and it becomes a profound assertion of presuppositionalism.

INFALLIBLE PROOFS

The conventional starting point in a study like this is to do a comparative word study of the word(s) in question. The Greek "*tekmeriois*" translated as "*infallible proofs*" in *Acts* 1:3 is unique and does not occur elsewhere in the Bible. So a word study does not help. Some scholars might search contemporary ancient literature for the word to discover its usage in classical Greek culture at the time. Accordingly, Alexander points out that *tekmerion* "is used by Plato and Aristotle to denote the strongest proof of which a subject is susceptible."² Similarly Gloag notes that *tekmeerion* "is used to denote the strongest of all proofs - *sure tokens*. It is employed by Aristotle to signify demonstrative evidence."³ However, classical usage does not decisively determine the Biblical usage in *Acts* 1:3. The apostles sometimes used common Greek terms, but invested them with a meaning somewhat different than the pagan usage. For instance, *theos* (God) and *agape* (love) in the Bible are not exactly the same as the pagan meaning of the words. The question remains: What does "*tekmeriois*" mean in *Acts* 1:3? For now we will grant that it means "*infallible proofs*". (If it meant something less than infallible proof then the problem presented for presuppositionalism would all but disappear.) Then the real question becomes, what does "*infallible*

proofs" refer to? There are several alternatives which we will explore in an orderly way.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AS THE REFERENT

The predominant interpretation of *Acts* 1:3 is that the visual evidence of Jesus Christ's resurrected body constituted the "*infallible proofs*" that convinced the apostles. One way or another most preachers and commentators adopt this view. Of the commentaries that I consulted across the theological spectrum, all of them assume that physical evidence proved the resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴ Henry Morris even wrote a popular book on evidential apologetics using *Many Infallible Proofs* as its title.⁵ By this interpretation "*presented Himself alive*" and "*being seen by them*" are taken as the referents of "*many infallible proofs*". This empirical understanding of *Acts* 1:3 is the easy view, the popular view, the majority view. But it is most assuredly the wrong view.

A little thought and study quickly overturns this superficial exegesis of *Acts* 1:3.

First, empiricism is not infallible. Our senses are not reliable and cannot be the basis of truth or sure proof. Descartes and others have wondered whether what we perceive is a dream, illusion, or real. Even if we manage to dismiss this radical doubt, everyone should admit that their senses play tricks on them from time to time. Convex and concave mirrors at carnivals distort how we look.

⁴ J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Klock & Klock, 1980 reprint of 1875 edition, 5 (Reformed). French L. Arrington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1988, 5 (Pentecostal). H. Leo Boles, *A Commentary on Acts of the Apostles*, Gospel Advocate Company, 1980, 18 (Restoration Movement). F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, William B. Eerdmans, 1986, 33 (Evangelical). Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Klock & Klock, 1979 reprint of the 1870 edition, Volume I, 42 (Presbyterian). Stanley M. Horton, *The Book of Acts*, Gospel Publishing House, 1981, 17 (Pentecostal). I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, InterVarsity Press, 1980, 57 (Methodist). Giuseppe Ricciotti, *The Acts of the Apostles: Text and Commentary*, Bruce Publishing Company, 1958, 46 (Roman Catholic). Cornelius Stam, *Acts Dispensationally Considered*, Berean Bible Society, Volume I, 28 (Dispensational).

⁵ Henry M. Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs: Evidences For the Christian Faith*, Master Books, 1974.

² Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Klock & Klock, 1980 reprint of 1875 edition, 5.

³ Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Klock & Klock, 1979 reprint of 1870 edition, Volume I, 45.

Mirages, holograms, movie special effects, and magic slight of hand all fool us. Refraction in water makes a fish look like it is somewhere it is not. Color blind people see things differently than others do. Ears play tricks on us as well. We “hear things” downstairs at night. Sound recordings can make us think something is there when it is not. Different people have different musical tastes. Is that because they relatively like different tunes or because they objectively hear different things? How can we tell? Touch and feeling are no more trustworthy. One person might be hot and another cold (often a husband and wife) at the same time in the same place. Nor can we depend on smell. The smell of a woman’s favorite food might turn her stomach when she is pregnant. Even the power of suggestion can change how we perceive things. How many good meals have been ruined by someone asking, “Does this stuff taste funny to you?” These and many more familiar examples show that senses and perception are relative. We cannot depend on them to formally prove anything in a demonstrative sense.⁶

Second, empiricism is not Biblical. “*For we walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Corinthians 5:7). The Bible promotes faith not physical evidence. So much so that miracles - real as they are - are not viewed or employed as proof of the truth. Proof is not their proper function.⁷ The Law recognizes the possibility of counterfeit signs from false prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1-5) and therefore demands that signs be judged by the Word of God, not *vice versa* (Deuteronomy 13:4-5). Likewise, Jesus Christ anticipated false signs and wonders (Matthew 24:24) as did Paul the Apostle (2 Thessalonians 2:9). “*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign*” (Matthew 12:39 & 16:4) because it is rebellious to judge rather than believe the Word of God. Skeptics who demand miraculous proof are likely to dismiss the supernatural anyway when

miracles do happen because they are predisposed to be skeptics by rejecting the Law of God (Luke 16:31). Miracles are always accepted from a stance of faith, not doubt. So miracles - even the supreme miracle of Jesus Christ’s resurrection - are never proof positive of the truth in Biblical terms.

Someone might propose that *Romans* 1:4 refutes this conclusion. For Jesus Christ was, “*declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.*” However, nothing in *Romans* 1:4 concerns empiricism or evidentialism as such. Declaring something to be true is hardly the same thing as demonstrating that it is true. Paul did not say that visual or historical evidence proved either Christ’s deity or resurrection. Rather, given the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus there are carried with that idea definite implications about His Person as well. That is no different than asserting that believing the Gospel or the Bible will lead to accepting their implications. *Romans* 1:3-4 is about the organic unity and logical coherence of the Gospel, not the mechanics of how one should come to believe it.

Third, compelling proof does not work on unbelievers infected with total inability to believe or repent. “*A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit*” (Matthew 7:18). “*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him*” (John 6:44). “*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not submitted to the law of God, nor indeed can be*” (Romans 8:7). “*For the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Corinthians 2:14). “*The god of this age has blinded who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them*” (2 Corinthians 4:4). This point does not directly apply to the apostles in Acts 1:3 because they were not unregenerate sinners. Yet sinful depravity does nullify any hope of evidential apologetics convincing unbelievers.

Fourth, the empirical reading of Acts 1:3 does not make sense. Suppose that Luke meant that seeing Jesus Christ’s risen body is what convinced the apostles. Then “*many infallible proofs*” would refer to experiencing the risen Christ. However, seeing Him hardly amounts to **many** infallible proofs. Nor do seeing, hearing, and touching Him amount to **many** infallible proofs. Someone might argue that many people saw him, but Acts 1:3 does not say

⁶ For a good critique of empiricism or the philosophy that sensory observation shows us the truth see Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, Trinity Foundation, 1973, 1989, 59-90.

⁷ Miracles do not prove but confirm the truth (Mark 16:20, Acts 14:3, Hebrews 2:4). This distinction is no mere sophistry. (Think about proving in contrast to confirming a hotel reservation.) Proof is prospective of assent; confirmation is retrospective of assent. Proof is certain; confirmation is probable. Proof is compelling; confirmation is reassuring. Proof upholds its conclusion(s) from below; confirmation stands along side the truth which stands on its own.

“one infallible proof shown to many people.” Someone else might suggest that it refers to the many times Jesus appeared to the apostles over 40 days. Yet it does not say, “one infallible proof shown many times”. Forty appearances over forty days would still be just one “proof” just as one witness giving testimony forty times in a court of law would still be just one witness. Neither is it talking about a cumulative effect; each “proof” is “infallible” on its own. Whatever the “*many infallible proofs*” were, they were many distinct proofs that were each individually demonstrative of the resurrection.

It becomes apparent that visual evidence of Jesus Christ’s resurrection is not and cannot be what Luke meant by “*many infallible proofs*”. Something else is what convinced the apostles.

CONVINCING PROOFS BY THE HOLY SPIRIT AS THE REFERENT

An alternative view might be worth briefly considering, though I know of no one who has advocated it. Suppose that “*many infallible proofs*” does not refer to objective proofs, but to the subjective effects. In other words, perhaps Luke was saying that many convincing proofs turned the apostles to faith in the resurrection. Whether the so-called proofs were compelling or valid would be immaterial. The point would be that these proofs were effective on the apostles.⁸

If this was the case in *Acts* 1:3, then Luke would be asserting that the Holy Spirit effectually, infallibly convinced the apostles. How He convinced them, and with what evidence or argument, would not matter. Such a view is consistent with Biblical

⁸ Doubting Thomas (*John* 20:24-29) presents a case where this kind of subjective effect of visual evidence is exemplified. Thomas wanted to see and touch Jesus before he would believe He had risen from the dead (*John* 20:25). When Jesus appeared to Thomas the Lord offered to be handled by the doubter (*John* 20:27), probably to undermine his excuse. Whether or not Thomas actually carried this out, Jesus acknowledged that sight played a role in the response by Thomas (*John* 20:29). Yet neither the story nor the words of Jesus say that Christ’s visual appearance constituted objective proof or valid demonstration. All the Scripture says is that Thomas believed. It is likely that the words of Jesus (which amounted to a reproof) were more decisive with Thomas than seeing Him. Indeed, Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (*John* 20:29) pointing out that visual evidence is in no way necessary for faith.

presuppositionalism. It leaves the power of “proof” to the Holy Spirit and not to evidence or argument as such. Thus, the Holy Spirit convinced them of what they saw. Thus, the Holy Spirit convinced them of the Kingdom of God. All this is theologically true. However, we must again reject this hypothetical interpretation as unfitting to the text. Syntax and grammar do not seem to support this meaning. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine Luke referring to the Holy Spirit as a “proof”. Even more to the point, the Holy Spirit is hardly **many** infallible proofs. If we substitute the surmised meaning into the text, it just does not make sense with that little word “many” in there.

This erroneous view faces some of the same problems as the empirical view as well as some of its own. So we must reject the subjective interpretation just as we rejected the empirical view.

THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES AS THE REFERENT

Strange as it may first seem, the context of *Acts* 1:3 leads away from empiricism and evidential apologetics and straight to Biblical presuppositionalism.

Acts is actually a continuation or second volume to the Gospel of Luke. It is unfortunate that many readers forget this as they think of the Gospel of *John* intervening between *Luke* and *Acts*. The connections between *Luke* and *Acts* are obvious. Both were presumably written by Luke the Doctor. Both were written to Theophilus. *Acts* explicitly refers back to *Luke* as the “*former account*” (*Acts* 1:1) and picks up where Luke left off. So the context of *Acts* 1:3 reaches back to the end of the Gospel of *Luke*. *Acts* 1:2 says that Jesus “*through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles*”. Apparently this is parallel to *Luke* 24:45 where, “*He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.*” Clearly Luke was thinking back to the prior account in *Luke* when he wrote *Acts* 1:3. That is where we should look for the referent of “*many infallible proofs.*”

So what was it in *Luke* 24 that convinced the apostles? It was not visible evidence. Jesus said, “*Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have*” (*Luke* 24:39). Did this convince them? No it did not. “*They still did not believe*” (*Luke* 24:41). Yes, they were joyful. Yes, they marveled. But they did not believe with certainty. Doubt lingered. If “*many infallible proofs*”

(Acts 1:3) meant visual evidence, then they should have been convinced and believed right then and there having been confronted by the risen Lord. But they did not.

The tipping point for the apostles' faith was not visual evidence but scriptural truth. "*He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day' (Luke 24:45-46).*" That is what convinced them; it was **necessary** according to God's Word. When the apostles saw Jesus they wondered, but did not believe. When they comprehended the scriptures about Christ's death and resurrection then they believed that He had risen. He had to rise from the dead because the Scriptures said He would.

Considering the prior context of *Luke, Acts 1:3* means that Jesus showed the apostles "*many infallible proofs*" from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (*Luke 24:44*). Proof texts from the infallible Old Testament, properly explained infallibly by the infallible Lord Jesus Christ, constituted "*many infallible proofs*".

Such an interpretation is fully consistent with Biblical presuppositionalism because it relies on Scripture for "proof". It makes sense of "*many infallible proofs*" because there are many Scriptures in the Old Testament that Jesus could expound that imply the Messiah would be raised from the dead and reign forever in the kingdom of God.⁹ This view applies the quality of infallibility to Scriptures and

their interpretation by Jesus, not to fallible evidence or perceptions thereof. And this view functions to unite *Luke* and *Acts* to present a consistent story as to how, why, and when the apostles believed with conviction that Jesus Christ had indeed risen from the dead.

This is not to deny the physical evidence itself. Jesus Christ objectively rose from the dead and the visual evidence agreed with that fact. However, *Luke 24* and *Acts 1:3* teach that the clincher was not the visual evidence but the Messianic prophecies. The *modus operandi* of the apostles agrees with this. Though Peter confessed to have seen the risen Lord, in *Acts 2:24-32*, he quoted *Psalms 16:8-11* and preached about its implications to prove it. In *Acts 17:2-3*, Paul reasoned from the Scriptures, "*explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead.*" Formal demonstration came from the Scriptures to those inclined to believe them.

BACK TO ACTS 1:3

Armed with this interpretation, does *Acts 1:3* and its immediate context make sense? First, it should be noted that the text does not really say that the visual appearances are the referents of "*many infallible proofs*." "*He also presented Himself alive*" is **what** was proven and "*being seen by them*" merely states the occasion **when** it was proven. Of course, Jesus Christ expounded infallible Scriptures about Himself to the apostles while He was with them. That does not mean His bodily presence was the proof as such. The verse itself does not say what the proofs were.

Furthermore, the introduction to *Acts* given by Luke makes sense and is more comprehensive if "*many infallible proofs*" is taken to mean proof texts from the Scriptures. "*Many infallible proofs*" means the previous exposition of infallible Old Testament Scriptures. "*Being seen by them*" means the present manifestation of Jesus when He did the exposition. "*Speaking of the Kingdom of God*" means the doctrine of the Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. All this was illuminated by the Holy Spirit as Jesus taught them.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Broadly speaking, the prophets, the Lord, and the apostles habitually proved their point by appealing to Scripture as written or to God's Word as delivered directly by the prophets. They did not appeal to empirical evidence except for *ad*

⁹ *Psalms 16:8-11* is one classic Messianic prophecy that implies the resurrection of Christ as interpreted by Peter in *Acts 2:24-32*. *Isaiah 53:11-12* also plainly implies the resurrection of the Suffering Servant. Yet the case for Jesus Christ's resurrection does not rest on resurrection prophecies alone. *Genesis 3:15* implies the victory of the woman's seed - Messiah - over the serpent's seed. That would remain unfulfilled had Jesus remained in the grave. Likewise the promised blessing of Abraham's seed to all nations (*Genesis 22:18*) would be thwarted had Jesus not overcome death. *Acts 2:14-21* quotes from *Joel 2:28-32*, which promises that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. That could hardly happen if the Lord was finally dead; calling on a corpse does not help. All the kingly prophecies that the Messiah would reign forever would come to naught if Jesus was not raised from the dead. When the implications of these and similar Old Testament scriptures are considered, there are indeed many texts that call for Christ's resurrection.

hominem purposes. So, for instance, Jesus regularly appealed to Scripture to make a constructive point or correct mistaken ideas (*Matthew* 9:13, 12:3-8, 15:3-9, 19:4-5, 22:31-32). He appealed to evidence or logical argument only to make *ad hominem* attacks to show how inconsistent and silly the contrary positions of His opponents were (*Matthew* 12:11-12; 12:27, 22:19-22, 22:41-45). Foolishness is useful to confound the fool so he will not be wise in his own eyes (*Proverbs* 26:5). Therefore physical evidence is often a good weapon against empiricism.¹⁰ Logical argument is likewise a good weapon against rationalism¹¹, for the presuppositions of unbelief carry within them the seeds of their own destruction. However, that does not mean evidence or logic positively proves the truth of God's Word. We should never embrace foolishness to prove our own first principles, lest we be like the fool (*Proverbs* 26:4). You can fight fire with fire, but you cannot build with fire. We do not stand in judgment on God's Word, examining it as though it

was up to us to establish its truth. We take God at His word on faith.

CONCLUSION

"*Many infallible proofs*" in *Acts* 1:3 does not refer to the visual or physical evidence of Jesus Christ's resurrection. Rather, it refers to the many Messianic prophecies in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms which imply the resurrection and which Jesus explained to His apostles during the forty days of His appearances. How much more certain can you get than the infallible Lord explaining infallible Scriptures under the conviction and illumination of the infallible Holy Spirit?

Therefore, the conventional interpretation of "*many infallible proofs*" by commentators and preachers is incorrect. *Acts* 1:3 is no proof text or guide for evidential apologetics. Rather, it asserts Biblical presuppositionalism. In other words, the apostles concluded, "The Scriptures say it. I believe it. That settles it." This is what Luke meant by, "*many infallible proofs*".

¹⁰ When an unbeliever asserts that there is no scientific evidence for creationism and that science fully demonstrates evolution, it is perfectly valid to appeal to the physical evidence of a young Earth and point out gaps in evolution to refute that sweeping assertion. Yet that does not mean we can positively prove creationism scientifically. We cannot. Science involves observation and repeatable experiments, neither of which applies to creation *ex nihilo*. Or if an unbeliever says that there is no historical evidence that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it is worthwhile to catalog some of the evidence for him from the New Testament, Tacitus, Josephus, and so forth to nullify his denial. Yet that does not mean we can or should attempt to prove the resurrection occurred with historical facts which the skeptic will explain away.

¹¹ Discerning and exploiting the logical inconsistencies of opposing positions is a vital skill in apologetics. Some simple examples of statements that carry the seeds of their own destruction are: (1) "Everything I tell you is a lie." (2) "All extremists should be shot." And, (3) "Only idiots make absolute statements." More seriously we can similarly take apart the positions of unbelief. (4) Existentialism promotes the idea that whatever I decide is true and right is true and right. I decide that it is true and right that existentialism is false and wrong. Therefore existentialism is false and wrong. (5) Some forms of nihilism say that the world is so bad that no world would have been better. Nihilism is itself part of this bad world. Therefore no nihilism would be better. (6) Schopenhauer advocated the right and virtue of suicide, but David S. Clark astutely pointed out that he had neither the courage nor consistency to practice what he preached. (7) If we probe deep enough all unbelief involves such fatal inconsistencies.

New ebook

***Freedom and Capitalism: Essays on Christian Politics and Economics* by John W. Robbins is now available as an ebook. You can purchase the download for \$15 from our website. It is available as a MOBI file (compatible with Kindle) and as an epub file (compatible with most other readers).**

Valuable Archive Available

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) has made available the archive of *The Presbyterian Guardian*, a publication that began about the time of the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS) in Philadelphia. What makes this archive so valuable? There are some articles by and about Gordon Clark in it, and it covers from the OPC's (and WTS') perspective the Clark-Van Til Controversy. The following is an edited commentary on the coverage of the Controversy in the pages of the *Guardian* from Benjamin Wong. To see the full article at Sean Gerety's God's Hammer blog, go to (<http://godshammer.wordpress.com/2010/08/28/the-clark-van-til-controversy-as-politics-the-failure-to-unify/>):

The Clark-Van Til Controversy as Politics – The Failure to Unify

By Benjamin Wong

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) has made the entire collection of *The Presbyterian Guardian* available at its website: <http://opc.org/guardian.html>. I like to thank the OPC for making them available.

By my count, there are at least 45 editorials, articles, communications, news items, letters to editors, *etc.* in *The Presbyterian Guardian* that are relevant to the Clark-Van Til Controversy. They are a fascinating read. One thing (among many others) that struck me is that after the Van Til faction had taken effective control over the OPC, they did not attempt to unify the denomination. Rather, the Van Tillians did not stop until they drove their opponents out of the OPC.

In a typical national political convention (Republican or Democrat), after all the campaigning is over there will be a winning candidate. Typically, in his acceptance speech to the convention, the winning candidate will reach out to the losers to unify the convention. Losing does not mean the losers have to give up their positions. But as members of a political party, they are expected to endorse the party platform. At a minimum, the losers are expected not to work against the party platform. But this symbolic gesture of reaching out to the losers to unify the convention is very important – it helps to heal the animosities that have developed between the candidates during the campaigns.

But it was not so with the Van Tillians. The Van Tillians were very good in the tactics of church politics:

(a) They took control of the Editorial board of *The Presbyterian Guardian* (*i.e.* control the propaganda).

(b) They defeated the attempt to place Westminster Theological Seminary under OPC oversight.

(c) They progressively took over key positions at Presbyteries and the General Assembly of the OPC.

(d) Graduates of Westminster Theological Seminary began to fill the pulpits of the OPC and gained influence at the grassroots level.

But after they took effective control over the OPC, the Van Tillians did not stop. They continued their church politics until they drove their opponents out of the OPC. There was to be no “unifying the convention.”

The Answer (the written response to the Complaint) was signed by 5 persons: Alan Tichenor, Robert

Strong, Floyd E. Hamilton, Edwin H. Rian, and Gordon H. Clark. It’s instructive to learn from *The Presbyterian Guardian* what happened to each of them.

Alan Tichenor left the OPC in 1948.

(a) “Orthodox Presbyterian Church News: Tichenor to Be Ordained” (unsigned). Volume 15, No.18 (October 10, 1946): 281: “The major part of the session of Presbytery was consumed by the examination for ordination of Licentiate C. Alan Tichenor of Philadelphia, who received, at this meeting, a call to the pastorate of the Knox Church of the same city. Mr. Tichenor distinguished himself by the modesty and lack of bravado in his bearing. As he was one of five who presented to Presbytery a pro-posed Answer to the Complaint against the Presbytery in connection with the licensure and ordination of Dr. G. H. Clark, he was questioned at somewhat greater length than usual. There appeared to be general satisfaction throughout the Presbytery as to his position on all points except those connected with the doctrines of the incomprehensibility of God and the noetic effects of sin. Difficulties in connection with these points were not resolved to the satisfaction of all, but, in view of certain considerations concerning Mr. Tichenor which appeared in the course of discussion, the Presbytery finally determined by majority vote to proceed with the ordination.”

(b) “Testimony Being Circulated” (unsigned). Volume 17, No.1 (January 10, 1948): 14: “This Sectarianism is evidenced in several ways. First, with respect to the ordination of men to the ministry, tests beyond those required by our constitution have been invoked. There was a long and persistent effort in the Presbytery of Philadelphia and in the General Assembly to prevent and then to bring into question the ordination of Dr. Gordon H. Clark. And during this past year there was a similar determined opposition to the ordination of Mr. C. Alan Tichenor, in spite of the fact that the previous General Assembly had upheld the Presbytery of Philadelphia in approving the theological examination of Dr. Clark who had expressed essentially the same views.”

(c) “Tichenor to Arabia” (unsigned). Volume 21, No.4 (April 15, 1952): 69: “The Rev. C. Alan Tichenor, Ph.D., has resigned his pastorate”

Robert Strong, along with his congregation, left the OPC in 1949. “Orthodox Presbyterian Church News: The Church in 1949” (unsigned). Volume 19, No.1 (January, 1950): 16: “Two ministers and the congregations of which they were pastors withdrew from the denomination. They were Dr. Robert Strong and Calvary Church of Willow Grove, and the Rev.

Franklin Dyrness and Faith Church of Quarryville. Dr. Strong subsequently accepted a call to the Southern Presbyterian Church, and the Rev. Richard Gray went from Bridgeton to Willow Grove, but retained his membership in the denomination. Several ministers accepted calls outside the denomination during the year.”

Floyd E. Hamilton left for Korea in 1949 under the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions.

(a) “Testimony Being Circulated” (unsigned). Volume 17, No.1 (January 10, 1948): 14: “Second, with respect to foreign missionary appointees the same extra-constitutional tests have been raised....

“The increase of this Sectarianism has now in 1947 become extremely manifest in the case of Rev. Floyd E. Hamilton. Although he had served with distinction for twenty years as a teacher and missionary in Korea, he was prevented by committee and assembly actions from returning there to teach in a seminary that had urgently requested his services.”

(b) “Hamilton to Korea Under Independent Board” (unsigned). Volume 18, No.2 (February, 1949): 30: “The Rev. Floyd E. Hamilton and Mrs. Hamilton have been appointed to foreign mission service in Korea by the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. ...

“In 1946 they were placed under appointment for service in Korea, by the Foreign Missions Committee of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Shortly before the 1947 Assembly the Committee, having received a request from the Korea Theological Seminary for Mr. Hamilton to be sent there to teach, considered the question and decided that at that time they would not send Mr. Hamilton out for that purpose. The decision occasioned extended discussion at the 1947 Assembly, but members of the Committee were re-elected by the Assembly. When this decision, apparently interpreted by many as approval of the Committee’s action, was announced, Mr. Hamilton indicated that he was withdrawing from his appointment by the Committee....

“During his stay in this country Mr. Hamilton served in a home missionary project in California, then for a time as general secretary of the Committee on Christian Education of the denomination.... In doctrinal discussions in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church recently, Mr. Hamilton took an active part in advocating the general positions represented by the views of Dr. Gordon H. Clark, and as a member of the Assembly’s Committee on Doctrines, submitted a minority report to the 1948 Assembly.”

Edwin H. Rian left the OPC in 1947 and re-entered the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. *The Presbyterian Guardian* has little on this event.

Clark left the OPC in 1948. “Orthodox Presbyterian Church News: Dr. Clark Dismissed to U.P. Church” (unsigned). Volume 17, No.15 (November, 1948): 260: “Word has been received, without further details, that at a meeting of the Presbytery of Ohio of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, held October 14th in Indianapolis, the Rev. Dr. Gordon H. Clark, a minister of the church and professor of Philosophy at Butler University was dismissed to the Presbytery of Indiana of the United Presbyterian Church.

“Dr. Clark’s theological views have been a subject of controversy in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church since his ordination to the ministry in that denomination in 1944. A minority of the Presbytery of Philadelphia opposed his licensure and ordination, holding that his views were not in accord with the faith of the church at significant points. A complaint against the action of the Presbytery in licensing and ordaining him was carried to the church’s General Assembly which, however, failed to sustain the complaint. A committee appointed by the General Assembly has made a study of the doctrines involved, and its reports are now before the presbyteries for consideration.”

In all things, one must have a sense of proportion. However one views the doctrine of the Incomprehensibility of God, it is not an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. One should not have broken fellowship with other Christians over this doctrine. This adage is a good one: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

The OPC was a small denomination. It could ill afford a split. If I remember correctly, Dr. Robbins estimated that close to a third of the denomination walked out the door as a result of the Clark-Van Til Conflict. Is it good church politics that after one has seized effective control, instead of unifying the denomination, one continue to drive one’s opponents out of the denomination over non-essentials?

Van Til had second thoughts. In his last interview with *Christianity Today*, Van Til remarked that his distinctive doctrines should not be used as a test of orthodoxy. If only Van Til had the moral courage to apologize to Clark when they were still living, then that would have helped to heal the acrimony that has existed between the Van Tillians and the Clarkians for the last 60 years.