

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.

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America's Augustine: Gordon Haddon Clark

John W. Robbins

Early in the morning of April 9, Gordon Clark entered Paradise. His departure from this world was quiet—he died at home in his sleep after an illness and hospitalization of several weeks. There was no elaborate funeral; nothing would have been more out of character for this unassuming teacher. His body was buried near Westcliffe, Colorado, in the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rocky Mountains. A more appropriate place would be hard to imagine, for it was the blood of Christ that Clark trusted for his salvation.

His death came at the culmination of a long and distinguished career of teaching and writing. Born in Philadelphia in 1902, Clark was the author of more than thirty published books at the time of his death, and several manuscripts remain yet unpublished. His textbook on *Logic* for Christian schools and colleges will be issued in May, and a commentary on *Ephesians* is scheduled for release next summer. He spent some of his last days in the hospital correcting the proofs of *Ephesians* with the help of one of his two daughters.

During his career, Clark had taught at the University of Pennsylvania, from which he received his doctorate in philosophy in 1929; Wheaton College; Reformed Episcopal Seminary; Butler University, where he was Chairman of the Department of Philosophy for 28 years; Covenant College; and finally at Sangre de Cristo Seminary in Colorado. His teaching career spanned almost 60

years, from 1927 to 1984, and the mark he has left on Christian theology will never be erased.

Some may think it an exaggeration to refer to Clark as America's Augustine, but those who have studied his works will not. Not only did he consider himself an Augustinian (he repeatedly and modestly emphasized that he was simply restating, refining, and developing insights Augustine had originated), but he was the equal of the African doctor in breadth of learning, and his contributions to theology and philosophy are both original and brilliant. Not many histories of philosophy have been written by Christians in this century. Clark's *Thales to Dewey* has been in print since 1957 and is a standard college text. It is a model of philosophical clarity and literary style. One of his early texts on Hellenistic philosophy has been in print for forty-five years—no one has published anything worthy to replace it. *A Christian View of Men and Things*—Clark's outline of his philosophy—has become a contemporary classic. No Christian since Augustine, except Clark, has attempted what Clark accomplished masterfully in *Historiography, Secular and Religious*. And at the time he died, Clark had just completed a manuscript on the *Incarnation*, part of his major series of books on systematic theology, the first to be written by an American Calvinist in over a century. As his remaining works are published and a new generation of Christians becomes familiar with his thought, they too will agree that he was indeed America's Augustine.

Such recognition did not come in his lifetime. He did not occupy a chair at a prestigious university, yet no Christian in the twentieth century has been more qualified to do so. But the absence of proper academic recognition was only part of the story; the presence of ecclesiastical hostility was another. Some of the strongest opposition to Clark arose in putatively Christian institutions. In 1943 he left the faculty of Wheaton College because of the College's antipathy toward Reformed Christianity. In 1944 a faction within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, centered on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, attempted to defrock Clark in a campaign that lasted for years and finally failed, but not before doing irreparable harm to the church. Ironically, Clark had helped J. Gresham Machen organize the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the mid-1930s.

It was Clark's misfortune to live in a century in which Christian knowledge is at an ebb, despite—or perhaps because of—the large numbers of books being published by religious publishers. While he lived, Clark was defamed as a rationalist, a pantheist, and an absolute idealist by men who both misunderstood what Clark had written and were offended by his uncompromising defense of the truth. A philosopher by education and profession, and a theologian by preference, Clark was surrounded by critics ignorant of philosophy and heretical in theology. He defended revelation and the possibility of man's knowing God, only to be attacked as a rationalist. He refuted secular philosophies by exposing their internal contradictions, only to be criticized for an unbiblical reliance on mere human reason. Throughout his works he emphasized the importance of epistemology, the theory of knowledge, maintaining that the first question of philosophy—the first question to be asked of anyone who makes any assertion—is, "How do you know?" Such a concern for the justification of knowledge was not appreciated by those who do not care to give reasons for their metaphysical assertions, and Clark was called an absolute idealist. Clark defended the sovereignty of God in *Biblical Predestination; Religion, Reason and Revelation; and What Do Presbyterians Believe?* only to be dismissed as a fatalistic determinist who denies man's

responsibility and makes God the author of evil. As a matter of fact, in 1932, at the age of 29, Clark published an essay in *The Evangelical Quarterly* on "Determinism and Responsibility" that clarified the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, a relationship that theologians had sought to understand for centuries. That essay is one of his seminal contributions to Christian theology.

The controversies that surrounded Clark in his life, however unpleasant they have been for him and his family, were, in the providence of God, designed to benefit both Clark and the church; for they stimulated his brilliant mind to consider and write about errors that have plagued the church throughout the ages. Clark debated and defeated those who deny the inerrancy of Scripture, the image of God in man, the sovereignty of God, the Trinity, justification through belief alone, the adequacy of human language for expressing divine truth, the existence of the soul, and the necessity for systematic theology. Paul tells us that heresies must come in order that those approved by God maybe revealed. Nothing could be more obvious than that Clark was approved by God.

Ronald Nash has called Clark "one of the greatest Christian thinkers of our century." Carl Henry has referred to Clark as "one of the profoundest evangelical Protestant philosophers of our time." Both assessments are true but inadequate. Clark is, and shall remain, one of the greatest Christian thinkers of all time.

God has been especially gracious by giving us Gordon Clark for a short while; let us be especially grateful to God, and as zealous for God's truth as Clark was while he was among us. It was my privilege to know Clark for 13 years: We first corresponded when he was at Butler and I was a graduate student at Hopkins. His work has been enormously helpful to me, and it will be indispensable to a new generation of serious Christians who want to bring all thinking into captivity to Christ. Clark's goal must also be ours:

There have been times in the history of God's people, for example, in the days of Jeremiah, when refreshing grace and

widespread revival were not to be expected: The time was one of chastisement. If this twentieth century is of a similar nature, individual Christians here and there can find comfort and strength in a study of God's Word. But if God has decreed happier days for us and if we may expect a world-shaking and genuine spiritual awakening, then it is the author's belief that a zeal for souls, however necessary, is not the sufficient condition. Have there not been devout saints in every age, numerous enough to carry on a revival? Twelve such persons are plenty. What distinguishes the arid ages from the period of the Reformation, when nations were moved as they had not been since Paul preached in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, is the latter's fullness of knowledge of God's Word. To echo an early Reformation thought, when the plough man and the garage attendant know the Bible as well as the theologian does, and know it better than some contemporary theologians, then the desired awakening shall have already occurred.

The only fitting monument to Clark, and the one he would most desire, is not one made of stone and wood, but the dissemination of the truth he loved and defended all his life. "He who guards my doctrine," Christ said, "will not see death ever." Gordon Clark did not see death; when the first rays of the morning sun shone on the eastern slopes of the Rockies last Tuesday, Clark saw Christ.