

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)

Number 350b © 2018 The Trinity Foundation Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692 November-December 2018
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Gordon Clark and Other Reformed Critics of Karl Barth

By Douglas J. Douma

Clark was well positioned to write on Karl Barth. He had known of Barth's work and influence for many years, and with the sabbatical, he was able to dedicate a greater proportion of his time to the work than with any other previous book he wrote.¹ Though Clark was capable of reading German (he learned German in high school, and studied for a semester in 1927 in Heidelberg, Germany), the translation of most of Barth's *Dogmatics* into English in the early 1960s would have made Clark's task easier. Any contention therefore that Clark didn't understand Barth perhaps speaks more to the confusion of the object of study than of the mind of the student. That is, if Clark misunderstood Barth, it certainly wasn't for lack of time, effort, or ability; it is more likely, as Clark later contended, that the subject matter itself is confused or even irrational. Furthermore, having had his own conflict with Van Til, Clark would not too easily be swayed by Van Til's criticism of Barth.

By the time Clark wrote on Barth, Carl Henry was telling Clark that it might be better to focus his attention on Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) who “has already taken the initiative on the Continent.”² Clark responded

¹ Due to this fact, Clark noted, “Of course, many others have carefully expounded and criticized his ideas until the public may wonder whether there remains anything further to say.” Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method*, 2nd edition, Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1963; Trinity Foundation, 1997, 1. Citations refer to the Trinity edition.

² “I trust your work on Karl Barth is proceeding smoothly. The next man at whom to get for a major project, after Barth, is Bultmann. Your contribution on Barth will be strategic because he will continue to be a force in America for fifteen or twenty years, but my present series in *Christianity Today* will indicate that Bultmann has already taken the initiative on the Continent.” Carl F. H. Henry, letter to Gordon H. Clark, November 22, 1960, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

to Henry saying, “You are most discouraging (!) in your letter and in the lead editorial of Nov. 21, just when I am going full blast on Barth, to report that Barth is dead and Bultmann reigns.”³ Clark continued his work on Barth nevertheless.

Though Clark was never able to have direct conversation with Barth, he had a couple of indirect interactions. The first was by means of a public dialogue printed in *Christianity Today*. Clark, Professor Fred H. Klooster (1922–2003) of Calvin Seminary, and Van Til each submitted questions directed to Barth, which were printed in the July 3, 1961 issue. Dr. Clark's two questions were as follows:

Was it reasonable for Paul to endure suffering in his ministry (or is it reasonable for us) if all are in Christ and will perhaps be saved anyhow, and if, as you once said, [Ludwig] Feuerbach and secular science are already in the Church?

In your *Anselm* (English Translation, p. 70) we are told that we can never see clearly whether any statement of any theologian is on one side or the other of the border between divine simplicity and incredible deception. Does not this make theology—your own included—a waste of time?

In the January 5, 1962 issue of *Christianity Today*, it was noted that owing to the pressure of work, Barth was unable to answer the questions put to him by Clark, Van Til, and Klooster. And so, one of the translators of Karl Barth's writings, Geoffrey Bromiley (1915–2009), suggested some answers from Barth's *Dogmatics*. Then the original questioners were given the opportunity to

³ Gordon H. Clark, letter to Carl F. H. Henry, November 26, 1960, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

annotate and respond to Dr. Bromiley's replies. To the first question, Dr. Bromiley commented:

The answer is twofold. First, Barth does not hold it as authoritative or certain that all will enjoy the benefits of the salvation sufficiently attained for all in Christ. Secondly, knowledge and faith are necessary for this enjoyment, and these come through the ministry of Christians in the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence Christians have a necessary part to play in the prophetic aspect of the work of reconciliation, and no sense of futility need hang over their work and warfare.

And Clark's response was printed:

Barth is not altogether clear on the matter of universalism. In some places he seems to say that all are saved, whether they know it or not. In this case, a Christian message might comfort some troubled souls for the time being, but inasmuch as it does not determine their future bliss, a missionary is hardly called on to suffer very much in proclaiming a comforting but unessential message.

To the second question Dr. Bromiley commented:

The statement would seem to demand rather than to refute the work of the dogmatician. Dogmatics is necessary in order that we may make sure that our own statements are on the right side of the border, and in order that we may develop a critical discernment in relation to those of others.

And to this, another annotation of Clark was printed as follows: "It still seems to me that if we can never distinguish between truth and deception, dogmatics by Barth, Bromiley, or myself is useless." This dialogue evidenced the theological distance between Clark and Barth.

The second of Clark's interactions with Barth was in some ways more indirect, even though both were physically present in the same space. When Clark attended Barth's speech in Chicago in 1962—one of two places Barth spoke in America—he did not have the privilege to ask any questions. Only an indirect connection with Barth might be noted in that Clark's former student, Edward J. Carnell (1912–1972), did ask questions of Barth as a member of the panel.⁴

Thus, Clark's sabbatical year, his reviews of some of Barth's works, the brief dialogue he had with Bromiley,

and his attendance at the Barth event in Chicago prepared Clark to write and publish his *Karl Barth's Theological Method*. Clark noted Barth in some other writings, but the aforementioned book is the primary source for the following analysis.

Gordon Clark's Critique of Karl Barth

Critique I: Barth Is Irrational or, At Best, Various Rational and Irrational

Clark's overriding critique in *Karl Barth's Theological Method* is that Barth's thought is irrational or, at best, variously rational and irrational. Not only is it Clark's conclusion that Barth's theology results in irrationalism, but he also contends that Barth actually embraces that conclusion himself. Such an embrace, Clark argues, defeats Barth's own position. Clark explained,

Barth asserts that the concept of theology cannot be systematically connected, a systematic conspectus is an impossibility, and the name of Jesus Christ as used by Paul does not represent a unified thought. Barth's point is not merely that the Bible is inconsistent. He indeed holds that it is; he accepts only its main teaching and rejects the doctrine of infallible inspiration. But here he is talking about theology, his own theology, and it is his own theology that he now says is illogical, unsystematic, and self-contradictory.⁵

Despite the irrationalism he saw in Barth, Clark held that at times Barth accepts logic and cannot therefore be seen as consistently irrational. Clark noted, "It is not only Barth's irrationalistic paragraphs that need emphasis,"⁶ and, "Although Barth here and there decries systematizing theology, his actual practice is often systematic. He is well aware, for example, that the

⁵ Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method*, 63–64. See also Gordon H. Clark, "Introductory Remarks," in *First Lessons in Theology* (unpublished manuscript, Sangre de Cristo Seminary Library, c. 1977). The introduction of Clark's unpublished systematic theology is available online: <https://douglasdouma.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/unpublished-151-introduction-typed.pdf>. In the first pages of *First Lessons in Theology*, Clark wrote, "After World War I Karl Barth introduced a theological method that captured many seminaries and produced a voluminous literature. The method may be somewhat difficult to describe, but Barth unequivocally states what it is not: 'In dogmatics it can never be a question of the mere combination, repetition, and summarizing of Biblical doctrine' (*Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 16; Thomson, translator). ... For an evangelical, in the historical sense of the word, theology is—of course not 'the mere combination, repetition' of Biblical texts, but—certainly a summarizing and especially a logical arranging of the main Scriptural doctrines."

⁶ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 65.

⁴ See Douglas J. Douma, *The Presbyterian Philosopher, The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark*, Wipf and Stock, 2017, 208–209.

doctrine of baptism is related to the Nicene Creed as parts of a comprehensive revelation.”⁷ Clark continued, “It is abundantly clear, therefore, that Barth in many passages accepts and uses the law of contradiction. He makes unmistakable claims to intelligibility and rationality. But there were also the other passages in which he belittled systematic thought and accepted mutually incompatible ideas.”⁸ A consistent use of the law of contradiction, however, would defeat any embracing of irrationalism.

Clark regularly used *reductio ad absurdum* (“reduction to absurdity”) to highlight the absurdities and contradictions—and therefore the falsity of various philosophies. This form of argument temporarily assumes the position’s premise or premises and then deduces propositions from those premises, looking for ones that are absurd in themselves or are contradictory with other deduced propositions (or contradictory with the assumed axiom itself).⁹ Thus, always keen to emphasize logic, Clark wrote, “Freedom from internal self-contradiction is the *sine qua non* of all intelligibility.”¹⁰

In a section titled “Has God Spoken,” Clark again concludes that Barth is variously rational and irrational. Clark first quotes various statements of Barth’s that “would ordinarily be understood in a sense agreeable to the orthodox Protestant doctrine of verbal inspiration.”¹¹ That is, it is ordinarily understood that when man repeats the words of Scripture, he repeats the Word of God. But Barth does not agree with this view. Clark wrote, “When Barth replies to Tillich, he is on the

side of language and intelligibility,”¹² but at other times has expressions that “are nothing other than the negative theology of the impossible mystics.”¹³ And so Clark concluded that Barth proposes two incompatible types of theology, “one is rational; the other is irrational skepticism.”¹⁴

Clark traced the root of irrationalism in Barth’s thought to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). In *Karl Barth’s Theological Method*, Clark noted that “his [Barth’s] early works echo the ideas of Kierkegaard—Paradox, Eternity and Time, Infinite Qualitative Difference, Totally Other” (62). And later Clark explained further:

One thing is clear, however. In his various writings Barth made use of Kierkegaard’s Paradox, Eternity versus Time, Infinite Qualitative Difference, and Totally Other. Now, when Barth shows so much dependence on Kierkegaard, one would normally suppose that he remains basically irrationalistic, unless he clearly and emphatically rejects the irrationalism of these terms. But by ambiguous or indefinite language he avoids both outright assertion and outright denial of contradiction.¹⁵

Despite linking Barth to Kierkegaard, Clark acknowledged that Barth’s irrationalism was more prominent in his early works. And, in fact, he saw that Barth must have at some point become dissatisfied with Kierkegaard. Clark wrote,

Naturally no one expects Barth to be an Hegelian, but then neither would anyone expect this Hegelian phrase [“All is rational”] to be acknowledged by a thoroughly faithful disciple of Kierkegaard. Its

⁷ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 66.

⁸ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 67.

⁹ “Nearly all discussions among men are thought to proceed on common presuppositions. This is normally expected. And when a discussion does not so proceed, when it deliberately rejects common axioms, the one party may indeed be confused. But he need not be deceived. He must be given a lesson in geometry. The process of the *reduction* must be explained to him. There are two parts to this process. First, the apologetic must show that the axioms of secularism result in self-contradiction. On a previous page Logical Positivism’s principle of verification was given as an example. Then, second, the apology must exhibit the internal consistency of the Christian system. When these two points have been made clear, the Christian will urge the unbeliever to repudiate the axioms of secularism and accept God’s revelation. That is, the unbeliever will be asked to change his mind completely, to repent. This type of apologetic argument neither intends deception nor does it deny that in fact repentance comes only as gift from God.” Clark, *Karl Barth’s Theological Method*, 109–110.

¹⁰ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 68.

¹¹ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 206.

¹² Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 207.

¹³ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 209.

¹⁴ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 209.

¹⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Trinity Foundation, 1989, 109. See also Gordon H. Clark, *In Defense of Theology*, Trinity Foundation, [1984] 2007, 26. In this text, Clark says that, “Despairing of intellectual solutions in a world of insane chaos, the theologians of the twentieth century remembered the iconoclastic Dane. The first of these was Karl Barth, who seized upon the notion of paradox and emphasized the opposition between time and eternity, but whose later writings toned down these themes.” In *God’s Hammer*, Clark stated that “Neo-orthodox theology, or rather the neo-orthodox lack of theology, though initiated by Kierkegaard about 1850, and brilliantly abetted by Martin Kahler just before 1900 and also by Martin Buber, was not widely accepted here until Karl Barth’s writings became popular at the end of World War I” (96).

occurrence therefore indicates a dissatisfaction with the Danish theologian's irrationalism.¹⁶

It is apparent that Clark viewed Barth's theology as forming three distinct periods: first, Barth's training as a Liberal or Modernist until about the time of World War I; second, a period of his early irrationalistic works until some unspecified later date; and third, a final period in which Barth rejected irrationalism but had an "unwillingness to follow through" with the consequences of taking that position.¹⁷

Clark's critique mostly focuses on that second period of Barth but also notes that Barth had rejected some of his former irrationalism. Clark thus shows that he was aware of Barth's third period position. He noted, for example, "Although Barth had early been influenced by Kierkegaard, he has changed and now is not so fond of the idea of paradox."¹⁸

One might argue that Clark's critique of Barth missed the mark because it focused on Barth's second period, which contained views he no longer held at the time of Clark's critique. But Barth scholar Bruce McCormack holds that there was little substantial change in Barth between the supposed second and third periods. McCormack, in fact, denies the very distinction between a second and a third Barthian period.¹⁹ If McCormack is

right on this point and Barth's views after his conversion away from Liberalism are harmonious, then Clark's criticisms of Barth would retain against Barth's later writings whatever validity and force they had against Barth's earlier works.

Though Barth may have distanced himself from the irrationalism of Kierkegaard, Clark found remaining vestiges of irrationalism in Barth's rejection of the Reformed view of man being made in the "image of God." Barth held that the concept of the image of God relates not to mankind's rationality but to the distinction between male and female. Clark wrote of this as "a highly imaginative interpretation"²⁰ and later called it a "bizarre interpretation that hardly needs to be refuted," asking, "What characteristics of male and female are to be found in God, of which our distinctions in sex could be the image?"²¹ Later, in an article in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Clark explained the situation in more detail.

Karl Barth originally denied that God created man in his own image. God was "Totally Other." There is no similarity whatever between God and man. But if God's knowledge and our "knowledge" do not coincide at least in one proposition, we can know nothing about God at all. For this reason, revelation cannot be a communication of truth, and although Barth is tremendously interested in theology, it is hard to find any rational motivation for it in dialectical theology. Barth's later publications acknowledge a divine image in man. However, he continues strenuously to deny that the image is rationality. Therefore, theology as knowledge of God remains impossible. Emil Brunner puts it perhaps even more pointedly: not merely words but their conceptual content itself has only instrumental significance; God and the medium of conceptuality are mutually exclusive; in fact, God can speak his word to man even through false doctrine. Strictly, Neo-orthodoxy makes all doctrine false. Barth's image turns out to be, most remarkably, the sexual distinction between man and woman. Since this distinction occurs in animals also, one wonders how it can be the image that sets man apart from the lower creation. And since there are no sexual

¹⁶ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 125.

¹⁷ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 125.

¹⁸ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 125-126.

¹⁹ "Barth never departed from this fundamental viewpoint. That fact is concealed by the paradigm currently used by scholars in interpreting Barth's theological development between *Romans* and the *Church Dogmatics*. According to this paradigm, Barth's development in the twenties is best understood in terms of a turn from dialectic to analogy, which most scholars associate with the book which Barth wrote on Anselm in 1931. In truth, such a paradigm is deeply flawed. It overlooks the fact that a form of analogy was already at work in *Romans* and co-existed with dialectic throughout the twenties. Thus, all talk of a turn from...to...is seriously misleading. Even more important, however, is the fact that this paradigm fails to recognize that analogy as Barth understood it in the *Church Dogmatics* is an inherently dialectical concept. For Barth, an analogy between God's knowledge of himself (the divine self-speaking) and our knowledge of him (theology) only arises as the result of a dialectical movement in which God takes up the language in which humans seek to bear witness to him—a language which in itself is inadequate to bear witness to God—and gives to it, by grace, an adequacy which it would not otherwise possess. In the revelation event, a relationship of correspondence is actualized between the word and human words. That is Barth's doctrine of analogy. The first moment of this conception of analogy, the motor which drives it, is the dialectic of veiling and unveiling of

Romans." Bruce McCormack, "The Unheard Message of Karl Barth," *Word & World*, 14, no. 1 (1994): 64.

²⁰ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 123.

²¹ Clark, "The Wheaton Lectures," in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark, A Festschrift*, 74; *Clark and His Critics*, 63.

distinctions in the Godhead, one wonders how this can be an image of God at all.²²

This view, Clark argued, has consequences. Without rationality as a common ground among all people created in the image of God, evangelism and apologetics are impossible. Clark wrote,

Barth denies a common ground between believer and unbeliever and therefore also a point of contact between the unbeliever and the Gospel. The only point of contact that he allows is one which occurs at or after the moment of conversion. Because of this he repudiates apagogic argument, excludes all independent apologetics without specifying any definite place for a dependent apologetics, and has virtually nothing to say to the outside world, if there is one.²³

Critique II: Barth's Theory of Language and Knowledge Results in Skepticism

Clark held that the irrationalism remaining in Barth's views not only impacted evangelism and apologetics, but also led Barth's theory of language and knowledge into skepticism—the view that no knowledge is possible. Though Clark applauded Barth for various good elements of his theory of language and knowledge, he argued that Barth often did not follow through with them.²⁴ This, Clark argued, causes Barth's theory to fall into the category of skepticism.

Perhaps the central fault that Clark saw in Barth's theory of language was the division Barth created between regular concepts and concepts about God. Clark held that Barth “separates between the truth of God's revelation and the truth of proposition.”²⁵ But, as Clark noted, if “our concepts apply only to created objects,” then “it is impossible to attempt to talk about God.”²⁶ In

such a case, nothing can be known about God. Similar argumentation continues in a subsection titled “Skepticism” in a chapter on “Language and Theology” where Clark addresses Barth's contention that “God is not similar to anything and therefore cannot be known through our ordinary and only categories.”²⁷ To this contention Clark wrote, “A blank denial of similarity between God and men is unbiblical,”²⁸ and, “This denial of similarity, like the idea of the Totally Other, makes knowledge of God impossible.”²⁹

Barth's theory of knowledge, Clark argued, is in fact shown to concern something other than knowledge. Clark wrote, “Possibly the skepticism of this position is somewhat hidden from its advocates by their substitution for knowledge of something that is not knowledge.”³⁰ Barth is seen to limit knowledge to man's “offering of thanks” to God. To this point, Clark wrote, “How can knowledge, *i.e.* belief in or acceptance of a true proposition, depend on giving thanks or feeling awe? This is not true in mathematics. Nor can it be true in theology.”³¹ And, “Barth does not want to tie down the word knowledge, when used in a religious context, to anything resembling the ordinary meaning of the word.”³² Clark concluded, “Therefore the line of criticism has been that skepticism lurks behind Barth's many assertions of the possibility of knowledge because he is not really talking about knowledge.”³³

Clark noted additional logical problems in Barth's view of language and knowledge. For instance, if, as in Barth's view and words, the Scriptures “become the word of God,” then there is a time when the Scriptures are not the word of God. From this Clark concluded that “if unambiguous sentences can become true and then become false, if they are true only from time to time, there is no defense against skepticism.”³⁴ Clark also held that skepticism is a result of Barth's subjectivism. He wrote, “If, however, the words of the Bible are not revelation, what is the latter? Can it be a communication of truth? Can it be objective? Can it save Barth from skepticism? The suspicion that Barth does not escape subjectivism is reinforced rather than allayed by his explanations.”³⁵ To Barth's explanation that “direct identification of revelation and the Bible...takes place as an event...when and where the word of the Bible

²² Gordon H. Clark, “The Image of God in Man,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 12, no. 4 (Fall 1969): 215–222.

²³ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 124. Note: When Clark here says, “if there is one,” he is not questioning Barth's belief in the existence of the world itself; rather, based on earlier statements in the book, he is questioning whether Barth believes there is anyone outside of the Church. That is, Barth includes virtual heretics like Schleiermacher and Feuerbach as “of the church.”

²⁴ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*. “Barth will soon hesitate to carry through with this emphasis on rational communication” (132). “Most unfortunately [Barth] does not follow through with the theme of words, propositions, language, subjects and predicates, and intelligibility” (135).

²⁵ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 157.

²⁶ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 137.

²⁷ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 168.

²⁸ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 168.

²⁹ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 169.

³⁰ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 169.

³¹ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 170.

³² Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 171.

³³ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 171.

³⁴ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 190.

³⁵ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 194-195.

functions as the word of a witness...when and where by means of its word we also succeed in seeing and hearing what he saw and heard," Clark sees only subjectivity, arguing, "In the case of two people hearing them, they may at the same time both be and not be the words of God. This is not true of other words. Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" remains the words of Lincoln no matter who hears them or does not hear them. Why should God's words be different in this respect?"³⁶ Clark's use of *reductio ad absurdum* here results in showing that Barth's view has words of the Bible "both be and not be the words of God," a contradiction proving the falsity of the underlying philosophy.

Clark's Critique Compared to Those of Other Reformed Theologians

Seeing that the particulars of Barth's thought had been thoroughly discussed, Clark centered his critique on logical problems in Barth's method.³⁷ In fact, in *Karl Barth's Theological Method*, Clark held that some of Barth's particular positions are quite acceptable. For example, he noted that Barth (unlike the Modernists) accepted that Jesus was born of a virgin.³⁸ Also, pointing out a positive point of Barth's apologetics, Clark wrote, "Appreciative mention ought to be made of Barth's constant denial of a common platform with other types of thought... On this account Calvinistic theologians will for all future time be indebted to Karl Barth."³⁹ Clark, in fact, included a whole chapter on Modernism in which he often noted agreement with Barth's views. In that chapter, Clark wrote, "They [Calvinists and Lutherans] would...agree in the main Barth's analysis of the liberal conception of God is accurate and devastating. Modernism substitutes man for God."⁴⁰ Also, throughout the last few chapters of his monograph, Clark gives Barth the benefit of the doubt and seeks ways whereby Barth's thought might avoid skepticism. Even though Clark concludes that this attempt to avoid skepticism in Barth is to no avail, his attempt at fairness is notable. This is in stark contrast to the more polemic writings on Barth by Cornelius Van Til.

In agreement with most of the other Reformed theologians noted above, Clark viewed Barth's doctrine of Scripture to be erroneous (since Barth didn't hold to

inerrancy) and his theology to be non-Reformed. Clark, in fact, likely agreed with most of the Barthian critiques of Machen, Hodge, Zerbe, and Van Til.

As for Van Til's critique that Barthianism is a form of Modernism, it is possible that Clark would have agreed that there is significant overlap. However, serious differences between Barthianism and Modernism would likely have prevented Clark from making that exact connection. Clark might agree more with Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema (1886–1965), who wrote contrary to Van Til's assertion that Barthianism is Modernism. Hoeksema said, "If I try to conceive of Barth as a modernist pure and simple, too many elements of his theology will not fit into that concept."⁴¹ As evidence of this, one might look to Clark's statement, "That the Word is a divine act occurring from time to time sharply distinguishes Barth's view from modernism."⁴²

Going Barthian

Barthian influence grew throughout much of the twentieth century, even into former strongholds of Reformed and Presbyterian thought. In European universities, significant elements of Barthianism were promoted by, among others, T. L. Haitjema (1888–1972) at the University of Groningen, G. C. Berkouwer (1903–1996) at the Free University of Amsterdam, and T. F. Torrance (1913–2007) at the University of Edinburgh. In fact, George Harinck has noted that by the time of Van Til's *The New Modernism*, which came out in 1946, "nearly all of the theology professors in the Netherlands Reformed Church—the largest Dutch Protestant denomination—sympathized in one way or another with Barth and opposed neo-Calvinism."⁴³ In the United States, the formerly Reformed bastions of Princeton Seminary and Calvin Seminary and the once-Fundamentalist Fuller Seminary moved in Barthian directions. At Princeton Seminary, Barth's friend John Mackay (1889–1983) was hired as president in 1936 and summarily brought in neo-orthodox professors, including Emil Brunner as a visiting professor in 1938; E. G. Homrighausen (1900–1982), who worked at the seminary from 1938 to 1964;⁴⁴ Otto A. Piper (1891–1982), who taught at Princeton from 1941 to 1962;⁴⁵ and George Stuart Hendry (1904–1993), who taught for 19

³⁶ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 195.

³⁷ That this was Clark's intention is affirmed in a letter of his to Carl Henry, in which Clark wrote, "My MS attempts to convict him [Barth] of inconsistency." Gordon H. Clark, letter to Carl F. H. Henry, April 8, 1961, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College.

³⁸ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 3.

³⁹ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 108.

⁴⁰ Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 43.

⁴¹ Herman Hoeksema, review of *The New Modernism* by Cornelius Van Til, *Standard Bearer*, 22 (1946).

⁴² Clark, *Barth's Theological Method*, 210.

⁴³ Harinck, "Dutch Origins," 29.

⁴⁴ James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture*, Eerdmans, 2012, 424–429.

⁴⁵ Moorhead, 437–441.

years at Princeton starting in 1949.⁴⁶ In the first half of the twentieth century, professors at Calvin Seminary, including Louis Berkhof (1873–1957),⁴⁷ Diedrich H. Kromminga (1879–1947),⁴⁸ and Clarence Bouma (1891–1962), all were critical of Barth. But the tide at Calvin Seminary began to turn to Barthianism following World War II when a new wave of Dutch immigrants came to America and military chaplains influenced by Barthianism returned from the war.⁴⁹ After Calvin Seminary fired all but one of its professors in 1952, Henry Stob (1908–1996) was hired as a professor and taught from an often Barthian perspective until his retirement in 1975.⁵⁰ Calvin Seminary professor Harold Dekker’s article “God So Loved—All Men,” which

⁴⁶ Moorhead, 447.

⁴⁷ Phillip R. Thorne, *Evangelicalism and Karl Barth: His Reception and Influence in North American Evangelical Theology*, Wipf and Stock, 1995, 42. Thorne notes that the first edition (1932) of Berkhof’s well-known systematic theology “contained no interaction with Barth,” but that based on added comments in the second edition (1938), it is clear that Barth did not influence Berkhof. Rather, Thorne notes, Berkhof’s “basic orientation was critical.” See also Louis Berkhof, “What is the Word of God?,” in *The Word of God and the Reformed Faith*, Clarence Bouma, editor, Baker, 1943.

⁴⁸ See Diedrich H. Kromminga, “The Theology of Karl Barth, A Critical Evaluation,” *Calvin Forum*, 4, no. 6 (1939): 130–133.

⁴⁹ Robert P. Swierenga, “Burn the Wooden Shoes: Modernity and Division in the Christian Reformed Church in North America” (conference paper presented to the International Society for the Study of Reformed Communities, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa, June 2000), http://www.swierenga.com/Africa_pap.html. See endnote 7 of the Swierenga paper, where it is noted, “Dr. P. Y. De Jong, a leader in the United Reformed Church, believes that the decline in the CRCNA began in 1945. Up until then, he noted, the church was solid, but then the ‘wrong kind of people came to positions of power and authority.’ Chaplains who went overseas came back influenced by Barthianism.”

⁵⁰ The influence of Barth on Henry Stob can be seen, among other places, in Stob’s memoir, *Summoning Up Remembrance*, where he wrote, “When I read what Barth had to say, my spirits rose. I sensed that here was a man who, affirming a transcendent God and a veritable supernatural revelation, expressed my own deepest sentiments and afforded me a contemporary reference point from which to engage my mentors and fellow students in relevant discussion. During that year I went on to read in Barth’s *Römerbrief* and in his *Dogmatics*, and also in Schleiermacher’s *Christian Faith*. Before the semester ended, I presented to Prof. Johanson a lengthy paper entitled ‘The Doctrine of Revelation in Barthian Theology.’ I can fairly say it was Karl Barth, who even in his Kierkegaardian existentialist phase, helped to establish me more firmly in the Reformed Faith.” Henry Stob, *Summoning Up Remembrance*, Eerdmans, 1995, 139.

departed from the traditional Calvinist understanding of limited atonement, perhaps best indicates the extent to which the seminary had moved in Barthian and Liberal directions.⁵¹ Barthian views may have first come to Fuller Seminary through the founder’s son, Daniel P. Fuller (b. 1925), who, having studied under neo-orthodox professors at Princeton and under Barth himself in Basel, began his tenure at Fuller Seminary in 1953. Further Barthian influence came there in Geoffrey Bromiley (1915–2009), an Anglican who taught at Fuller from 1958 to 1987. With these influences, Fuller professors James Daane (1914–1983),⁵² E. J. Carnell (1919–1967), and Paul Jewett (1920–1991), followed at least in part.⁵³ From these universities and seminaries, the Barthians’ teachings found widespread acceptance, particularly in the so-called “mainline” denominations like the Christian Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church USA.

While much of the Reformed world “went Barthian,” Westminster Theological Seminary faculty, including Van Til, remained resolutely opposed to Barthian theology. However, when Clark published his book on Barth, there was no acknowledgement of it from the seminary in its theological journal or anywhere else. Perhaps this was because the faculty had had a contest with Clark in the 1940s following his ordination in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It’s also possible that Clark’s book was too much of a late-comer to the field to get much notice. Or perhaps Van Til and his seminary colleagues noticed that Clark’s critique of Barth also applied in part to themselves.

Van Til and Barthianism

That Clark was writing his critique of Barth with an eye on his long-term adversary Van Til is a conclusion that has merit. In *Karl Barth’s Theological Method*, when Clark referred to “clear-thinking theologians who must be grateful for Barth’s emphasis on language,” he may have been subtly critiquing Van Til, who never wrote a treatise on language.⁵⁴ And Clark almost certainly had Van Til (and his [Clark’s] ordination controversy) in mind when he wrote of some “contemporary theologians” who “deny that God has given any

⁵¹ Harold Dekker, “God So Loved—ALL Men!” in *Reformed Journal*, 12, no. 11 (December 1962): 5–7.

⁵² Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, 116.

⁵³ “Most likely he [Carnell] had been influenced by Bromiley and Berkouwer.” Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, 102. See also Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, Zondervan, 1976, 106–121.

⁵⁴ Clark, *Barth’s Theological Method*, 129.

information to man.” The same conclusion, Clark argued, was the result of Van Til’s views.⁵⁵

On the face of it, it seems absurd to say that Barth’s most vocal critic, Van Til, had significant elements in common with Barth theologically. And, it seems, Clark is unique in making this connection (although Robert L. Reymond and David Engelsma later repeated Clark’s assertion).⁵⁶ But what exactly are the points of similarity according to Clark, and why are they troubling?⁵⁷

Clark first noted a Van Til-Barth connection to one of his publishers in 1951, saying,

[Van Til] is an excellent example of how neo-orthodoxy has permeated contemporary thinking. Dr. Van Til “adores paradox,” he holds that man’s mind is incapable of knowing any truth, that the Bible from cover to cover is not the truth, and that theological formulations, creeds, and so on are only “pointers” to something unknowable. The dependence on Brunner, even the wording, makes Dr. Van Til an admirable example.⁵⁸

And in a published article in 1957, Clark wrote,

To avoid doing an injustice to Van Til and his associates it must be stated that sometimes they

seem to make contradictory assertions. In the course of their papers, one can find a paragraph in which they seem to accept the position they are attacking, and then they proceed with the attack. What can the explanation be except that they are confused and are attempting to combine two incompatible positions? The objectionable one is in substantial harmony with existentialism or neo-orthodoxy. But the discussion of the noetic effects of sin in the unregenerate mind need not further be continued because a more serious matter usurps attention. The neo-orthodox influence seems to produce the result that even the regenerate man cannot know the truth.⁵⁹

So, the two major Van Til-Barth theological connections, according to Clark, are similarities in the doctrine of paradox and in epistemology. Clark saw that there were both similarities and differences between Van Til’s and Barth’s views of paradox. In a recorded lecture in 1981, a student asked Gordon Clark, “How does Van Til’s concept of paradox differ from Kierkegaard here?” Clark, who had previously equated Barth’s view of paradox with that of Kierkegaard, responded,

I hope to talk about Van Til before the semester is over. Let me say this: my impression is—I could mention some differences between the two—but my impression is that in spite of the fact that Van Til denies he is a neo-orthodox apologete, I think he has been very deeply influenced by neo-orthodoxy and unwittingly supports their position.⁶⁰

In the same lecture, Clark noted a similarity and hinted at a difference, saying,

Kierkegaard alters linguistic usage and speaks of paradox as inexplicable. The definition of paradox that appeals to me the most is that paradox is a “charlie horse between the ears.” But that’s not what Kierkegaard meant. For Kierkegaard, a paradox is a complete contradiction. We’ll talk about what Van Til or what Frame thinks a paradox is. But at any rate they both think that it is impossible to harmonize, at least by us. Maybe it can be harmonized by God; we’ll see.

The similarity Clark saw in the paradox doctrines of Van Til and Barth is that they both hold that the supposed paradoxical passages of Scripture are

⁵⁵ See Douma, *The Presbyterian Philosopher, The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark*, 260.

⁵⁶ “Exceedingly strange it is that as ardent a foe of Barthian irrationalism as is Van Til comes nevertheless to the same conclusion concerning the nature of truth for man as does Barth. The only difference in this connection between Van Til and Barth is that Van Til insists that truth is objectively present in biblical propositions while for Barth truth is essentially existential. But for both religious truths can appear, at least at times, paradoxical.” Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979, 105. And, “It is not clear to me what the difference might be between the paradoxical nature of truth as espoused by Van Til and his disciples and the “theology of paradox” of Kierkegaard and his pupil, Karl Barth. To the same proposition in the same sense at the same time, both Van Til and Barth say ‘yes and no.’” David Engelsma, “Hoeksema on a Controversy in the OPC,” *Standard Bearer*, 72, no. 1 (1996).

⁵⁷ Clark was not the only theologian to notice a similarity between Van Til and Barth. J. Oliver Buswell, for one, wrote of Van Til, “He is a well-informed and deeply zealous anti-Barthian; but I have sometimes wondered whether the zeal of his anti-Barthianism is not in part derived from the bitterness of close similarity in certain aspects of his Philosophy.” — “The Fountainhead of Presuppositionalism,” *The Bible Today*, 42.2 (November 1948): 48.

⁵⁸ Gordon H. Clark, letter to Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., October 15, 1951, Clark Library, Sangre de Cristo Seminary.

⁵⁹ Gordon H. Clark, “The Bible as Truth,” reprinted in *God’s Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics*, 29.

⁶⁰ Clark, “Irrationalism,” lecture, Gordon-Conwell Seminary, 1981, South Hamilton, MA, mp3, <http://www.trinitylectures.org/MP3/Irrationalism.mp3>.

impossible for man to harmonize. Though for Van Til—but not for Barth—these paradoxes can be harmonized by God, the result is the same: the exegete, regardless of his efforts, will be, in some places at least, unable to sort out or solve that which he finds to be conflicting doctrines in Scripture. Little good does it do to say that these conflicting doctrines are solvable by God, when to man they remain a mystery, as unresolvable for Van Til as they are for Barth. The problems here, as much for Van Til's view as for Barth's, include (1) the inability to distinguish between apparent contradictions caused by exegetical mistakes and apparent contradictions supposedly inherent in the Scriptures, (2) the destruction of any claim of Christianity's superiority to other systems based on its demonstrated consistency, and (3) the destruction of the central Biblical hermeneutical principle of comparing Scripture passages with other Scripture passages based on the assumption of non-contradiction. Van Til's doctrine of paradox, like Barth's, is destructive to the entire enterprise of exegesis and Christian doctrine.

A similarity can also be seen in the defense of paradox in Van Til and Barth. George Harinck wrote, “[Klaas] Schilder...disqualified Barth's use of paradox in religion as a revolution in theology. Barth, and Haitjema in his footsteps, seemed to have given up the classic aim to resolve discord in thinking. Instead Barth labeled this aim a sin.”⁶¹ Similarly, in *The Complaint*—written in opposition to Gordon Clark's ordination and signed by Van Til and others who supported Van Til's views—it is written that Dr. Clark's unwillingness to let two particular doctrines “stand unreconciled alongside each other” amounts to “rationalism.”⁶²

On the second point of connection between the theologies of Van Til and Barth, there is a similarity on the doctrines of God and knowledge. Karl Barth explains his doctrine of God—the “wholly other”—as “an infinite qualitative difference between God and man.” As such, man is “incapable of knowing Him.”⁶³ This makes for an unbridgeable gap between God's knowledge and man's knowledge and so results in skepticism. Van Til's Creator-creature distinction, when used to argue against any coincidence in man's

knowledge and God's knowledge, also makes for an unbridgeable gap between God's knowledge and man's knowledge and so also ends in skepticism. Different doctrines, same result. Though Van Til backpedaled from his view⁶⁴ and Barth stopped saying “wholly other,” they each continued to have in their theology an impassable divide between God's knowledge and man's knowledge. In that way, Van Til's view resulted in skepticism as clearly as did Barth's.

Confessionalism as a Bulwark

Though there are dangerous similarities to Barth in Van Til's theology, Van Til and other theologians at Westminster Theological Seminary were able to avoid the vast majority of Barth's novelties (and their respective errors). At least part of the reason they were able to do so was because of their confessionalism—their adherence to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

A more consistent reading of that *Confession*, however, would lead one to also reject the paradox doctrine of Van Til, which is at odds with the position of the *Westminster Confession* that the Scriptures have a “consent of all the parts.” And this “consent of all the parts,” for the writers of the *Confession*, was not merely that the parts consented in the mind of God, but also that the “consent of all the parts” is given as a reason that we humans are to find evidence of the Scripture being the word of God.

Many authors have written about Barth's influence on evangelicals. Books on this topic almost exhaust the possible permutations of “Barth” and “Evangelical.” Examples include *Evangelicalism and Karl Barth* by Phillip R. Thorne, *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology* by Sung Wook Chung, and *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* edited by Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson. These authors list the evangelicals who have “gone Barthian.” Included in this list are G. C. Berkouwer, Geoffrey Bromiley, Paul Jewett, Bernard Ramm, E. J. Carnell, and Colin Brown among others.⁶⁵

But these books perhaps do not differentiate strongly enough between the non-confessional evangelicals (including Baptists and Pentecostals) and the confessional Reformed and Presbyterians. The confessionally Reformed have been almost uniformly critical of Barth. The confessions, particularly the *Westminster Confession of Faith* but also the *Three Forms of Unity*, have functioned as a bulwark against the inroads of Barthianism and other doctrines. These confessionally Reformed critics include the previously

⁶¹ Harinck, “Dutch Origins,” 21.

⁶² John Wistar Betzold *et al.*, “The Text of a Complaint Against Actions of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in the Matter of the Licensure and Ordination of Dr. Gordon H. Clark” (filed with the Presbytery on October 6, 1944; presented at Eastlake Church, Wilmington, DE, November 20, 1944) PCA Archives, 309/10. This document is often referred to simply as *The Complaint*.

⁶³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edwyn C. Hoskyns, translator, Oxford University Press, 1968, 28.

⁶⁴ Douma, *The Presbyterian Philosopher*, 157–162.

⁶⁵ Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, 86–107.

mentioned A. S. Zerbe, J. Gresham Machen, C. W. Hodge Jr., Cornelius Van Til, Louis Berkhof, Herman Hoeksema, Fred H. Klooster, Diedrich H. Kromminga, J. Oliver Buswell, and Gordon Clark, as well as Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984), John Gerstner (1914–1996), and R. C. Sproul (1939–2017). Even the confessionalism (on the *Book of Concord*) of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, as evidenced by John Warwick Montgomery, and also of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has functioned to abate Barthianism, as these denominations have retained the doctrine of inerrancy.⁶⁶

Confessionalism, though, has not always been sufficient to prevent Barthian inroads. Among the Dutch Reformed, G. C. Berkouwer, James Daane, Henry Stob, and Lewis Smedes went Barthian.⁶⁷ And though confessionalism might have been the most successful bulwark against Barthianism, some Fundamentalist-evangelicals like Kenneth Kantzer and Charles C. Ryrie also rejected Barth.⁶⁸

In Clark's case, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was the system of belief which he supported. Unlike Barth, who denied the desirability of a system, Clark saw systematizing as necessary and unavoidable. The question wasn't so much "What is one's system?" (for all theologians naturally strive for some systematizing), but rather, "How consistent is one's system?" A system is to be judged on its consistency, and Barth's was lacking.

Conclusion

Clark's critique in *Karl Barth's Theological Method* has never, as far as this author can tell, been rebutted by any Barthian. This probably speaks to its obscurity more than to its paucity. The closest thing to a rebuttal of Clark's book is a review of the second edition (1997) by John C. McDowell in *Evangelical Quarterly* in 2002.

⁶⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2 volumes, Reformed Free Publishing, 1966. In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Hoeksema critiques Barth's eschatology as using "entirely different language from that which the church has always spoken and from that which Scripture speaks" (2:434), his soteriology as necessarily leading to universalism (2:479), and his conception of the word of God as "leaving us without an objective criterion of the knowledge of God" and as being "pure subjectivism" (1:6–7). See also J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, volume 1, Zondervan, 1962, 123, and Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, 43–49, 63–66.

⁶⁷ Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, 112–116. See also Swierenga, "Wooden Shoes."

⁶⁸ Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, 67–70.

But McDowell's critique is limited to the refrain that Clark "misunderstands Barth."⁶⁹

It is apparent from Clark's critique that accepting Barth would require the wholesale rejection of the Reformed faith. Barth's connection with Reformed thought is distant and distorted. His view is something wholly other and lacks much to be commended. It seems that those who followed Barthianism were those who wanted something new but didn't consider the full ramifications of that newness. They often left Schleiermacher for Barth, but later some of the same people left Barth for Brunner or for Bultmann or their own constructions. Fortunately, for Christians, the Bible is unchanging and its message eternal. The clarity of the Reformed faith and its stability in the confessions is a welcome relief from the irrationalistic oddities and ever-changing scene of Barthianism and its neo-orthodox offshoots.

There is little trouble understanding what Clark believes—that is, what historic Christianity holds. Many certainly disagree with it, but they understand it. In the opposite direction, Clark and other Reformed theologians certainly disagree with Barth, whatever their understanding of Barth is. Maybe they don't understand Barth, or maybe Barth ultimately cannot be understood because his views are inherently irrational.

2018 Christian Worldview Essay Contest Winners

The First Prize of \$3,000 and 15 books is awarded to Tabitha Pigeon of Norristown, Pennsylvania for her essay "By Faith Alone, Through Christ Alone."

The Second Prize of \$2,000 and 10 books is awarded to Jonée Lillard of Portsmouth, Virginia for her essay "The Science of Faith: *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Richard B. Gaffin Jr's Doctrine of Justification* and the Importance of Sound Theological Methods."

The Third Prize of \$1,000 and 5 books is awarded to Matthew Koerner of Wyoming, Michigan for his essay "An Analysis of Stephen M. Cunha's *The Emperor Has No Clothes*."

Congratulations to our winners, and thanks to all who entered. All contestants had to read *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Richard B. Gaffin Jr's Doctrine of Justification* by Stephen M. Cunha and write an essay about it.

⁶⁹ John C. McDowell, review of *Karl Barth's Theological Method* by Gordon H. Clark, *Evangelical Quarterly*, 76, no. 3 (July 2004), 272–275.