

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 353a Copyright 2019 The Trinity Foundation Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692 June 2019
Email: tjtrinityfound@aol.com Website: www.trinityfoundation.org Telephone: 423.743.0199 Fax: 423.743.2005

Reflections on the Christian Apologetics of Gordon H. Clark

By E. Calvin Beisner

[This paper was originally delivered as a lecture at an apologetics conference at Branch of Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Torrance, California, October 23, 2015.]

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

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

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

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

Part One: Clark's Presuppositionalism

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

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

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

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

Clark's axiom (using the singular collectively) was the Word of God, *i.e.*, Clark's axioms, using the plural specifically, are the thoughts of God, which so far as man's access to them is concerned (for God surely has thoughts that He has not revealed to us—indeed, He has told us so¹) are the content of the Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety in its original autographs (to borrow the language of the original doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Theological Society, of which Clark was one of the founders).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹ *Deuteronomy 29:29; Romans 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 16.*

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

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

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

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

misunderstand him is demonstrable by the fact that although he insisted that experience yields no *knowledge*, he often wrote quite clearly of the value of experience and some opinions derived from it (such as many facts² of botany, a subject he loved)—a value that stopped short of qualifying them as *knowledge*, it is true, but nonetheless a value. (A \$100 bill is not valueless merely because it is not a \$1,000 bill.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, 19.

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

Clark, however—because he rejected the popular definition of faith as something *extra-* or *contra-rational* and believed instead (because he was convinced Scripture defined the term this way⁶) that faith is *assent to an understood* proposition—rejected both definitions of Fideism. For Clark, faith and reason are neither contrary nor logically unrelated; rather, reason starts with faith. With Augustine, he would say, *Credo ut intelligam*, “I believe in order that I might understand.”⁷

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This article will conclude in the July, August Trinity Review. – Editor.

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

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

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

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