

# 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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## Scripturalist Hermeneutics and Extra-Biblical Information

By Douglas J. Douma

*Editor's Note: This article first appeared at Douglas Douma's web site A Place for Thoughts April 20, 2020 – douglasdouma.com. Douma authored a biography on Gordon Clark titled The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark, Wipf and Stock, 2016 and compiled and organized Clark's letters for Clark and His Correspondents: Selected Letters of Gordon H. Clark, Trinity Foundation, 2017.*

Despite covering a wide and deep swath of theology in his numerous books and articles a lacuna remains in the writings of Dr. Gordon H. Clark in that he never wrote a piece specifically addressed to the topic of hermeneutics or Biblical interpretation. Though indeed no individual writing of Clark's was dedicated to this topic—and he almost never used the word “hermeneutics” or “hermeneutical” in his writings—some elements of his views on the subject can be discerned in his writings. What is found there is a Reformed hermeneutic that radically places Scripture over extra-Biblical information not only in degree but in kind.

Books on hermeneutics typically list various “principles of hermeneutics” but rarely show their derivations. Are the principles of hermeneutics to be found in Scripture itself? Might they be based on logic? Or are they determined from other considerations, even extra-Biblical ones?

In Gordon Clark's thought hermeneutical principles (like knowledge in general) must either be found in Scripture or deduced from Scripture. Only then would he be consistent with his “Scripturalist” epistemology based on the axiom

“The Bible is the Word of God.” But in addition, he accepted logic (or valid reasoning) as a corollary principle to his axiom and, as such, would no doubt accept as valid hermeneutical principles based on logic. As for hermeneutical principles that are based on anything else—anything extra-Biblical—these must be rejected. It is in this rejection *en toto* of extra-Biblical hermeneutical principles that Clark's hermeneutics radically diverge from all others.

### Part 1: Principles of Scripturalist Hermeneutics I. The *Analogia Fidei* Accepted in Scripturalism

The main hermeneutical principle for Reformed theology is that of comparing Scripture with Scripture. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:9 explains:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is Scripture itself; and, therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

Called the *analogia fidei* or “analogy of faith,” this principle is merely an application of the law of contradiction. This principle presupposes that there are no contradictions between the various propositional statements of the Bible. If there were contradictions in Scripture, the comparison of Scriptural passages would bear these out and show that God's Word is not always true. But the Scriptures teach that God does not lie (*Numbers*

23:19), and that he is not the author of confusion (*I Corinthians* 14:33). The *analogia fidei* then has both Biblical and logical backing.

Clark approvingly comments on this principle in at least two places:

We are not supposed to take each verse in isolation and restrict ourselves to disjointed bits of scattered information. We are to compare Scripture with Scripture. What is not clear or complete in one verse may be clearer or may be completed in another. We are to infer and deduce. If the Bible teaches that David was king of Israel, and if it also teaches that Solomon was a son of David, we can legitimately infer that Solomon was the son of a king of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Even without understanding the verse, one can see that these interpretations are wrong because they contradict a number of other and clearer passages in the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

Clark's emphasis on the necessity of following the *analogia fidei* led him to contest the sub-Reformed view of Cornelius Van Til who contended for "paradox" in Scripture. As that debate has been discussed numerous times in other places, there is no need to delve into it here. It is mentioned merely to evidence that Clark was serious about this principle of hermeneutics.

What other principles might be included in Scripturalist hermeneutics?

## **II. Continuing Validity Accepted in Scripturalism**

One such principle might be summarized as "accept the continuing validity of what is taught in the Scriptures unless it is overturned at a later point." In a sense this principle is a continuation of the *analogia fidei* but with special reference to progressive revelation. The principle is derived logically as an application of chronology to the Scriptures. While it is not always clear which Biblical writing comes after another, much chronology can be determined from the Scriptures.

Again, this principle then has both Biblical and (chrono)logical backing.

That Clark accepted this principle at least in relation of the New Testament to the Old Testament is clear:

Some people act as if, or even definitely assert that, we cannot accept any of the Old Testament unless it is repeated in the New. The correct principle, however, is that we should not discard any of the Old unless told to do so in the New—as for example the ceremonial law.<sup>3</sup>

The correct principle of interpretation is not the Baptist one of discarding everything in the Old Testament not reasserted in the New; but rather the acceptance of everything in the Old not abrogated by New Testament teaching.<sup>4</sup>

Other principles of hermeneutics can likely be found in Scripture and / or logic. (And I encourage my readers to find others!)

## **III. The Adequacy of Language Necessary in Scripturalism**

The interpretation of the Scriptures also requires that it is possible for man to understand their meaning. Therefore, the medium itself—language—must be adequate for the communication of God's truth. This is a necessary presupposition, for without the adequacy of language no communication from God could be known to man and Biblical hermeneutics could not begin.

Clark writes,

Surely language, as God's gift to Adam, has as its purpose, not only communication among men, but communication between man and God. God spoke words to Adam and Adam spoke words to God. Since this is the divine intention, words or language are adequate. To be sure, on occasion, even on frequent occasions, sinful man cannot find the right words to express his thought; but

<sup>1</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Predestination*, [1987] 2006, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon H. Clark, "Desultory New Testament Curiosities," PCA Archives, 1984, unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, *Predestination*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Sanctification*, 1992, 61, now included in *What Is the Christian Life?* 2012, 84.

this is a defect of man, not an inadequacy of language.<sup>5</sup>

This point is surely non-controversial for Reformed Christians. Indeed, none of the points listed so far should be controversial for Reformed Christians. What makes Scripturalist hermeneutics unique—and perhaps even controversial—is the role, or lack thereof, played by extra-Biblical information.

## **Part 2: Scripturalist Hermeneutics and Opposition to Extra-Biblical Information**

As Scripturalism limits knowledge to that which is explicit in the Scriptures or logically deduced from the Scriptures, extra-Biblical information cannot be trusted and thus cannot be determinative in Biblical interpretation.

Perhaps the best explanation of this is from one of Clark's audio lectures where he says,

[John] Frame insists that we can derive knowledge from an observation of nature. And the quotation is “extra-Scriptural information to interpret Scripture.” As we need, or as we use “extra-Scriptural information to interpret Scripture.” But neither he nor Van Til explain how this is possible. This is a big gap in their theory. But Frame insists, “Thus we can use such data fearlessly and thankfully.” That is, we can use extra-Scriptural data fearlessly and thankfully. Does that mean that we should hold the discarded theory of gravitation? Does it mean that we should hold to Newton's idea that motion proceeds in a straight line? Does it mean that we must accept Einstein who says that motion never proceeds in a straight line? And that there is no gravitation? Are space and time independent frameworks as Newton said, or are they not independent as Einstein says? And who knows what the science will be a year from now.... Continuing to quote from Frame. “Even when we use extra-Scriptural information, as we must, (that's part of his wording), even when we use extra-Scriptural

information, as we must, to understand Scripture, we must hold loosely to this information.” Oh, I thought he said on the previous page, we can use it “fearlessly and thankfully.” Now he says we have to use it loosely. And if we use it loosely, then, even loosely, then we must reject the principle that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, which I think is the Reformed position. And of course, this matter of loosely, that just wrecks Frame's whole scheme.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Clark wrote of Robert Reymond:

If my esteemed colleague—and I do esteem him—wishes to make Scripture the sole basis for knowledge, and then add on something from a different source, his consistency eludes me.<sup>7</sup>

And it is not just Frame and Reymond who differ from Clark on this subject, but probably most every Reformed theologian.

Consider Louis Berkhof who wrote,

The principal resources for the historical interpretation of Scripture are found in the Bible itself. In distinction from all other writings, it contains the absolute truth, and therefore its information deserves to be preferred to that gleaned from other sources.<sup>8</sup>

Note that for Berkhof, the principles of hermeneutics are found principally in the Scriptures, but not solely in the Scriptures! The information in the Bible is preferred, but extra-Biblical information is not excluded.

Whereas theologians like Berkhof wish to retain extra-Biblical information as a second, lesser, form of knowledge after the Bible, Clark discards extra-Biblical information entirely. It is for him, not merely a different type of knowledge, it isn't knowledge at all. And since extra-Biblical

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Language and Theology*, [1980] 1993, 130, also included in *Modern Philosophy*, 2008, 259.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon H. Clark, Audio Lecture, “John Frame and Cornelius Van Til,” Gordon-Conwell Lectures on Apologetics, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *Language and Theology*, 151; *Modern Philosophy*, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 1950, 128.

information isn't knowledge it cannot be used to definitively interpret Scripture. If we remember the first principle above, Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. Is not Scripturalism the most consistent with this principle?

### Part 3: Was Clark Consistent? – Extra-Biblical Appeals in Clark

What about the times then in which Clark himself makes reference to extra-Biblical information? Was he being inconsistent?

Here are some of those times:

Since the point at issue is merely Greek usage, appeal can be made to books outside the Bible. Now, in the *Apocrypha*, *Ecclesiasticus* 34:25 (*LXX* 34:30) connects the verb baptize with purification. One must wash or baptize oneself after touching a dead body. *Numbers* 19:13, 20 shows that purification from contact with dead bodies was performed by sprinkling. Hence the verb baptize in the *Apocrypha* designates sprinkling.<sup>9</sup>

About two centuries before the birth of Jesus, the rabbis in Alexandria—where the large Jewish population had largely forgotten Hebrew—translated the Old Testament into Greek. This translation, called the *Septuagint*, uses the Greek word *Kurios* for the Hebrew *JHVH*. The New Testament, which frequently uses the *Septuagint* translation, applies this Greek title to Jesus: the Lord Jesus. Thus, the authors of the New Testament books identify Jesus as Jehovah.<sup>10</sup>

The Greek verb means *believe*. So it was translated in the previous verses quoted. Here will follow some instances of its ordinary use, both in pagan sources and in the Bible. The Biblical verses from the *Septuagint* are not chosen because they are Biblical, but, like the pagan sources, they show how the word was used in pre-

Christian times. When the New Testament authors began to write, they perforce used the common language.<sup>11</sup>

Even if the longer ending of *Mark* be spurious, it is nonetheless Greek, written by a Greek-speaking writer, and therefore bears on the meaning of the word.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, in Clark's commentary *First John*, he seems to approve of Leon Morris' work of seeking certain terms in the *Septuagint*, a translation of the original Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>13</sup>

How then to solve this dilemma? Are these extra-Biblical appeals merely opinion rather than knowledge with regards to extra-Biblical information? Truth cannot be built on a foundation of mere opinion. If an interpretation of Scripture is dependent on extra-Biblical information the understanding of the Scriptural passage is as tentative as the extra-Biblical information itself.

Maybe Clark answers all of these questions in this one place:

Ramm writes, "*Sola Scriptura* did not affirm that, with reference to the writing of theology, all knowledge other than [B]iblical knowledge is unnecessary"; presumably he means that a knowledge of Greek grammar is useful in writing theology. So it is; but since the New Testament is written in Greek, one may include Greek grammar in the sphere of Biblical knowledge. If he means a knowledge of archaeology or the sociology of Hittite culture, we reply that Protestants accept Scripture as perspicuous and sufficient. "All Scripture is inspired of God...that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." Writing theology, orthodox theology, is a good work. Extra-Biblical knowledge is therefore unnecessary, even if it has some value of its own.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*, [1983] 1990, 95, now included in *What Is Saving Faith?* 2004, 73-74.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles*, [1983] 1998, 113n.

<sup>13</sup> See: Gordon H. Clark, *First John*, 1980, 44-45.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon H. Clark, "The Concept of Biblical Authority," 1979, 16, included in *God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics*, [1982] 2011, 182

<sup>9</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe*, [1965] 2001, 242.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement*, [1987] 1996, 30.