

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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Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Clark Speaks from the Grave

Gordon H. Clark

Editor's note: More than a year before he died in April 1985, Dr. Gordon H. Clark had prepared an essay entitled Clark Speaks from the Grave, intending it to be published after his death. The Trinity Foundation has now published the lecture as a small book. What follows are brief excerpts from the lecture in which Dr. Clark replies to some of his critics: Cornelius Van Til, Vern Poythress, Robert Reymond, Gordon Lewis, and John W. Montgomery.

In all his critics he finds two failures: a "basic refusal to say what they mean," and a basic refusal to defend Christianity against worldly philosophy. Christian apologetics in the twentieth century, insofar as it is anti-Clark, is a failure. It fails either because it is empirical, or irrational, or both. With defenders of the faith like Van Til, Poythress, and Montgomery, Christianity needs no enemies.

Criticisms against the work of Gordon H. Clark made by Reformed theologians, and some others, hardly mention the details of his theology as stated in his *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* and his several commentaries on New Testament books. If there are some theological objections, such as those against his view on the incomprehensibility of God in *A Complaint Against the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (a complaint lodged by Clark's detractors against the presbytery because the presbytery voted in 1944 to ordain Clark), these theological objections quickly become more philosophical and epistemological. Rather

than being strictly exegetical, they are directed against his alleged "rationalism." Naturally the theology and the philosophy permeate each other. This controversy, in which after five years the General Assembly refused to rebuke the presbytery, continued on academically to his death. Since Clark's many publications were read and criticized by scholars outside that denomination, the philosophic or apologetic controversy is worthy of careful study.

From the philosophic point of view, so far as one can appeal to antiquity, it was a controversy between Plato and Aristotle, or, in Christian terms, between Augustine and Aquinas. Naturally this appeal cannot be interpreted too exactly, for Cornelius Van Til, who furnished the basic content of the *Complaint*, is best known as a Presuppositionalist and not as an Aristotelian. Nevertheless, and inconsistently as it would seem, he always maintained that the cosmological argument for the existence of God, though faulty as expressed by Aristotle and Aquinas, can be rephrased so as to be logically compelling. Unfortunately he never explained how.

Van Til's deficiency at this point is one reason, albeit a minor reason, by which to recognize that the controversy basically and fundamentally concerns the nature of logic and its use in theology. But the context is far wider than the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Westminster Seminary. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard denounced logic and installed passion on the throne

of theology. To be a Christian one must believe contradictions. Karl Barth continued with Paradox; and Emil Brunner declared that God and the medium of conceptuality *schliessen einander aus*—are mutually exclusive. Dooyeweerd and his followers, including Van Til, are not usually so extreme. Even so, Van Til asserted that "we dare not maintain that his [God's] knowledge and our knowledge coincide at any single point" (*A Complaint*, p. 5, col. 3, italics his or theirs). Some of Van Til's students have since tried to produce a Christian apologetic by rejecting the law of contradiction and combining empiricism, apriorism, and irrationalism into a synthetic diamond of many facets. One thing at any rate cannot be gainsaid: The nature and use of logic in theology is in this century a matter of great importance.

In addition to the usefulness and indispensability of the "trivial," the "platitudinous," and the "empty" logical forms, which alone determine that two statements are contradictories, or contraries as the case may be, the more common use fills the empty *a's*, *b's*, and *c's* with bears, stars, and the federal headship of Adam. There is no way to establish any article of the creed, much less a system of doctrine such as the *Westminster Confession*, without filling the form with Scriptural content. In view of Clark's commentaries on several New Testament books, it is ridiculous to charge him, as some of the more benighted apologists have done, with proceeding on the basis of logical one. Logic alone gives, $A(ab)$ $A(bc)$ implies $A(ac)$. Theology argues, All sinners are under the wrath and curse of God, All men are sinners, therefore all men are under God's curse. Or, All who are justified like Abraham are justified by faith, All who are justified are justified like Abraham, therefore all who are justified are justified by faith. This may sound academic, platitudinous, useless; but Paul did not think so in his letter to the Galatians. Steps such as these must be used in the formulation of every Christian doctrine. Another step, even a previous step, is the definition of justification. On the grounds that Poythress proposes, one would not know when, or even if, a respondent meant what Calvin and Hodge meant, and when, or even if, Poythress meant the Roman Catholic definition which confuses justification with sanctification.

This technical, professorial, academic platitudinarianism has serious implications for the ordination of prospective candidates for the ministry. The ordination vows of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, to which the most active of Clark's opponents belong, contain the question, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?" Now, quite aside from the fact that without the law of contradiction "sincerely" can mean "insincerely," the ordinand thinks to himself—or, rather, has already thought—that the term *system* has several meanings. It can mean the arithmetical system of numbering from one to thirty-three; why, of course I believe it is a system. If the previous presbyterial examination questioned him about justification as a judicial, divine sentence, he can say, so it is, and (to himself) it is also a life-long process of good works. It is both instantaneous and temporally extended. One must not subject oneself to the platitudinous trivialities of the law of contradiction. Besides, "receive and adopt" is a phrase of no precise meaning. They are fuzzy terms, and in some sense or other I receive and adopt the *Confession* as containing the vague terminologies of Scripture.

Actually this was done, though not so professorially, by hundreds of ordinands in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. until they altered the ordination vows in 1967.

Since Clark's complaints here so frequently depend on the absence of definitions and the refusal (of his critics) to defend an alternate theory, the injured apologete might reply that it is unnecessary to have any positive philosophy in order to show that Clark's views are unacceptable. He violates common sense, he severely restricts knowledge, he even contradicts himself. What he says just cannot be true. Of these objections the charge of self-contradiction seems even less than the others to require an alternate system to support it.

However, if the critic uses the law of contradiction, Clark can ask, By what theory do you justify your use of this law? How did you come to learn the requirements of logic? The critic is then faced with

the necessity of justifying his own method, for merely asserting that Clark contradicts himself is not, alone, a sufficient refutation. It assumes without foundation one of the points in question. This should be all the more evident since the days of Kierkegaard and Barth. Both of them explicitly accept and defend contradictory positions. The one supports himself on infinite passion and the other on Paradox. If the empirical apologetes could convict Clark of self-contradiction—and their attempts are far from successful—they would still have to defend some theory or other in order to refute his existential neo-orthodoxy. Therefore Clark can legitimately ask them whether they base their logic on sensory observation, and this is impossible, or whether they are Kantians to be destroyed by Hegel. One must on this account reject the idea that Clark can be refuted without one's accepting any definite systematic basis for the refutation, and hence his objections to their omissions are justified.

There is one further point that needs to be mentioned. It must be in the form of a footnote, or parenthesis—because, while so far everything has been well documented—this depends more on conversations, a letter or two, and perhaps some small article, than on published material. Even so, it is of tremendous importance. To avoid and to confute Clark's position, some of Van Til's disciples contend that God does not think in propositions, and hence dependence on "mere human logic" is an untrustworthy crutch. To this Clark made two replies. First, he remarked that his opponents cited no Biblical passage in which this is stated, nor did they deduce it by any "good and necessary consequence" from a group of such premises. Indeed, since the Bible is ninety percent propositional—commands and ascriptions of praise being the exceptions—it would be rather peculiar if the Bible would deny its own truths. Then, second, if God does not think in propositions how could he have given us all the information now contained in the sixty-six books? If he does not think that "David was King of Israel," how could he have framed that proposition for our instruction? Or, worse, if we say that God cannot think in propositions, we deny his omnipotence. And if we think in propositions and God does not, then Van Til's statement will be true, that God's knowledge and ours do not coincide at

any single point. Since we "know" that "David was King of Israel," God cannot know it, and therefore it is false. So are all the Gospels, and Christianity is a delusion.

After so much vigorous argumentation, is it necessary to engage in repetition so as to produce a concluding paragraph or two? If not necessary, it may yet be useful for those who have short memories, and also for those of the public who make no claim to competence in apologetics. Here then are some of the points on which Clark used to insist.

From beginning to end, Clark has given numerous examples of his critics' failure to define their basic terms. Poythress took pride in being ambiguous. The others at least omit the pride; but this does not atone for their ignorance of what sensation is, nor for the absence of any account of perception and imagery. Virtually all the essential components of a reasoned argument against Clark are missing. That is to say, they depend on unsubstantiated assertions.

Next, they allege scientific corroboration without having studied physics. One of them made ridiculous remarks on operationalism. Another discussed the law of gravitation without knowing what it is. None of them analyzed the actual methodology and procedures used in the laboratories. Then too, where one would most expect competence, their appeals to Scripture exemplify impossible exegesis; and where the Scripture supports Clark, they remain silent.

Some more than others misunderstand and therefore misrepresent Clark's position. The body of the text has indicated a few such cases. There are also logical blunders, as when one of the critics confused contraries with contradictories. Then there was the concluding discussion of individuation. Though it looms so large, almost the main point in some of their books, and omitted in very few, the reply has shown the critics' lack of any clear notion of what an individual is.

Underlying all these other complaints against the apologists, and permeating all their writings, is the basic refusal to say what they mean. They do not define their terms, with the result that their

objections against Clark are unintelligible. Of course, Clark was happy enough that they were unable to refute his views; but he was genuinely sad at another result. These men were self-styled apologists; and however much it is proper to refute a poor defense of Christianity, an apologist, if we remember *1 Peter* 3:15, must mainly direct his arguments against non-Christians. *Colossians* 2:8, where the *King James Version* is weak, really says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (*NIV*). They must engage and refute the arguments of John Dewey, Herbert Feigl, Ernst Nagel, B. F. Skinner, Gilbert Ryle, and so on. Otherwise the world has grounds for sneering at the apologists' incompetence, and Christianity suffers. Of course, omniscience is a bit hard to come by, but the first and absolutely indispensable step is the definition of terms.