A Place for Thoughts Douglas Douma

A List of Differences Between the Thought of Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til

24 Comments / Notes on the thought of Gordon H. Clark / By Douglas Douma / October 13, 2016

[Critique of this list is appreciated. I don't own many of Van Til's books and so haven't provided as many quotes of his positions as I would like.]

Outline:

- 1. The Incomprehensibility of God
- 2. The Relationship of the Faculties of the Soul
- 3. Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility
- 4. The Free Offer of the Gospel
- 5. On What is the Christian Presupposition
- 6. The Validity of Proofs for the Existence of God
- 7. The Nature of Paradox and the Scriptures
- 8. The Doctrine of the Trinity
- 9. The Role of the Senses
- 10. Whether Logic is Created or Uncreated
- 11. How Knowledge is Justified
- 12. Eschatology
- 13. Lapsarianism (the Logical Order of God's Decrees)

The differences between the thought of Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til became well-known after a group of elders in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church filed a complaint at presbytery against Clark's ordination in 1944. The document filed, called *The Complaint*, was signed by twelve elders, including Van Til, three months after Clark's ordination. It took issue with some of Clark's views and the procedure under which he was ordained. Clark, with four other OPC elders, responded with a document called *The Answer*. The controversy, which continued in the church until 1948, centered on four topics:

1. The Incomprehensibility of God.

a. Univocal knowledge vs. analogical knowledge.

Clark held that man's knowledge and God's knowledge have a univocal or single point of contact in that whatever proposition man knows is the same proposition God already knows. *The Complaint*, however, argued that "We dare not maintain that [God's] knowledge and our knowledge coincide at any single point." That is, *The Complaint* denied Clark's view of univocal knowledge.

Though *The Complaint* was clearly opposed to Clark's view of univocal knowledge, Van Til later wrote in his 1949 text, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* The point of reference cannot but be the same for man as for God" while "the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man coincide at no point in the sense that in his awareness of meaning of anything, in his mental grasp or understanding of anything, man is at each point dependent upon a prior act of unchanging understanding and revelation on the part of God." Thus (although he probably wouldn't admit it) Van Til came to side with Clark (against *The Complaint* he himself signed) in that the "point of reference" (the object known) is the same for God and man. In the second point of the Van Til quote above he argues that man's knowledge is dependent on or derivative of God's knowledge. And it is this distinction which Van Til means when he refers to man's knowledge as "analogical" to God's knowledge.

Whereas in Van Til's *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, "analogical" simply means "derivative of," Van Til's creator-creature distinction led the authors of *The Complaint* to think that analogy entailed that the propositions known by man are not the same as the propositions known by God. In Van Til's view of the creator-creature relationship (and of Divine Simplicity) man cannot know the same proposition that God knows without being or becoming God. Van Til wrote as much saying:

"I pointed out to him [Clark] then that for a creature to seek to know God comprehensively was to seek to wipe out the Creator-creature distinction. When he fell back on the distinction between God's being and His knowledge saying that it would be sin for men to aim for identity with God's being but no sin for man to seek for omniscience in knowledge I indicated that such a distinction would cut a rift in the very nature of God. But to no avail." – CVT to Charles Stanton, 27 December 1945, WTS Archives.

Thus the implication of Van Til's view of the creator-creature relationship (that there can be no point of coincidence between God's knowledge and man's knowledge) which was reflected in *The Complaint*, contradicted his view that "The point of reference cannot but be the same for man as for God." His view of the creator-creature distinction also led *The Complaint* to argue for a distinction in "content" between the knowledge of man and the knowledge of God.

b. Knowledge as mode and object vs. knowledge as mode, object, and content.

In Clark's view of knowledge, there is a distinction between the mode of knowing and the object of knowledge. Though the object (the proposition known) is the same for God and man, the mode (or way)

in which man knows a proposition is different from the mode in which God knows the proposition. Man's mode, he held, is qualitatively different from God's mode of knowing in that man's mode is discursive (coming to know propositions through learning) and God's mode is intuitive (having always known all true propositions). Further, in Clark's view there is a quantitative difference in the object of knowledge. That is, man knows (and can only ever know) a finite number of propositions while God's knowledge is not limited by anything outside of himself. In addition, Clark argued a second quantitative distinction in that man can only know some implications of any given proposition, whereas God knows all the implications of any given proposition.

The Complaint argued that the mode/object distinction (with Clark's quantitative and qualitative distinctions included) was insufficient. It agreed with Clark as far as the distinctions he did make, but wanted an addition a distinction in "content." The Complaint read:

"We gladly concede this point [Clark's distinction in mode]... However, this admission does not affect the whole point at issue here since the doctrine of the mode of the divine knowledge is not a part of the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of his knowledge. The latter is concerned only with the contents of the divine knowledge. Dr. Clark distinguishes between the knowledge of God and of man so far as mode of knowledge is concerned, but it is a tragic fact that his dialectic has led him to obliterate the qualitative distinction between the contents of the divine mind and the knowledge which is possible to the creature." Clark, however, never received a satisfactory answer as to what was meant by "content." He wrote to Edmund Clowney:

"The mode of knowing, as I use the word, is simply the psychological activity of the knower. The object is what the knower knows. An answer to the question, How do you know, would state the mode of your knowing. An answer to the question, What do you know, would state the object. And so far throughout all the discussion I have failed to see any reason for introducing any other element; in particular the third element [content] that has been introduced is simply unintelligible to me." – Clark to Edmund Clowney, 20 February 1946, WTS Archives.

The Complaint had denied any coincidence of "content" between man's knowledge and God's knowledge and had clearly meant "the proposition known" – that is, the object of knowledge itself. Realizing later, as Clark argued, that this led to skepticism, Van Til and his supporters changed their meaning of "content" to a vague "character of understanding." But without explaining what this "character of understanding" was (and how it differed from the mode and object) it was impossible for Clark, or anyone else, to know what they were talking about.

For more analysis of this situation see my Chapter 8 "The Continued Controversy and its Results" in *The Presbyterian Philosopher*, Wipf & Stock, 2017.

c. The nature of knowledge.

Clark held that knowledge is always propositional, that is – one can only know propositional statements as only propositional statements, not terms or ideas, can be true. Truth is a property only of propositions. Opposed to Clark, *The Complaint* read, "Now even if it could be assumed that human knowledge has this propositional character, it would still involve a tremendous assumption to conclude that the divine knowledge must possess the same character. Since our thinking is pervasively conditioned by our creaturehood, we may not safely infer the character of our knowledge what must be true of the knowledge of the Creator. Even if we could be sure that human knowledge might be resolved into distinct propositions, it would not necessarily follow that the knowledge of God, who penetrates into the depths of his own mind and of all things at a glance, would be subject to the same qualification."

Clark, however, put the burden of proof was on the Westminster professors to give evidence for the existence of "nonpropositional truth" and suggested that it may be "a phrase without meaning."

If knowledge is "justified true belief" and belief is "assent to an understood proposition" then so-called non-propositional knowledge would be "justified true assent to a non-propositional proposition." And a non-propositional proposition is a contradiction in terms.

2. The Relationship of the Faculties of the Soul.

- 1. The relationship of the faculties in the human soul.
- 2. The relationship of human faculties and divine faculties.
- 3. Whether God has emotions.

Clark held that when the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says "God is without parts or passions" that the "passions" are emotions, which God does not have. Those places then in Scripture that some might see as attributing emotions to God, Clark would call either anthropopathisms (human emotions attributed to God as a literary device) or volitions (acts of will).

3. Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility.

The Complaint was concerned that Clark's attempt to reconcile God's sovereignty and human responsibility (in his 1932 article "Determinism and Responsibility") was by its very attempt a form of "rationalism." Rather, they would have it that no one attempt to solve this supposed "apparent paradox." Clark opposed the idea that Scripture contained such paradoxes, and believed that Christians are bound to try to understand God's revelation through the correct hermeneutical method of comparing Scripture with Scripture.

4. The Free Offer of the Gospel.

The Complaint argued that "God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to all who hear," and "would have all who hear accept it and be saved." The Answer states "Dr. Clark's refusal to use such words [sincere, offer] springs from his desire not to be charged with Arminianism" as these terms have often been used by Arminians and Lutherans to describe an unlimited atonement and universal favor of God to all men.

I discuss these first four issues at length, including a historical survey of "the free offer" in Chapter 7, "The Arguments of the Ordination Controversy" in The Presbyterian Philosopher, Wipf & Stock, 2017.

Additional differences:

5. On What is the Christian Presupposition.

Van Til holds that we must presuppose the triune God. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 50.) [Can someone confirm this, I don't have a copy.] In other places he says we must presupposes the triune God "of the Scriptures." His emphasis seems to be on apologetics with unbelievers in making these statements, where Clark focuses on epistemology.

"Must not God be the axiom? For example, the first article of the Augsburg Confession gives the doctrine of God, and the doctrine of the Scripture hardly appears anywhere in the whole document. In the French Confession of 1559 the first article is on God, the Scripture is discussed in the next five. The Belgic Confession has the same order. The Scotch Confession of 1560 begins with God and gets to the Scripture only in article nineteen. The Thirty-Nine Articles begin with the Trinity and Scripture comes in articles six and following. If God is sovereign it seems very reasonable to put him first in the system. But several other creeds, and especially the Westminster Confession, state the doctrine of Scripture at the very start. The explanation is quite simple: our knowledge of God comes from the Bible. We may assert that every proposition is true because God thinks it so, and we may follow Charnock in all his great details, but the whole is based on Scripture." – Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, p. 72.

6. The Validity of Proofs for the Existence of God.

Clark rejected the traditional proofs for the existence of God as logically invalid. Van Til however held "... I do not reject 'the theistic proofs' but merely insist on formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture." – Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 197. "Van Til has said this over and over again. He doesn't accept Thomas' proof or any other proof. But he insists that there is an absolutely certain proof. A cogent theistic proof. And he indicates he means the cosmological proof not the ontological proof. And for some forty years now I've been bugging him to show me the proof, so I can see whether it is valid or not. He hasn't accommodated me as yet." – Gordon H. Clark, "John Frame and Cornelius Van Til", audio lecture.

7. The Nature of Paradox and the Scriptures.

Van Til emphasizes "apparent paradox" in those places of Scripture where he cannot reconcile two doctrines. This "apparent paradox" he holds to be objective in one sense – that it will be apparent for all people who read the Scripture – but not objective in the sense that God cannot solve the dilemma. Clark, on the other hand, held that paradox is a "charley horse between the ears" and that what is apparent to one person may not be apparent to another. Thus he held that we should attempt to resolve paradox through Scripture interpreting Scripture and deductions by "good and necessary consequence." "A paradox, in my opinion at any rate, a paradox is simply a confusion in one's mind. And hence what is paradoxical to one man is not paradoxical to another." – Gordon H. Clark, "John Frame and Cornelius Van Til", audio lecture.

8. The Doctrine of the Trinity.

Van Til thinks it is acceptable to refer to the Trinity as both "one person" and "three persons." Whereas he might think this is a paradox, Clark calls it a contradiction.

"Van Til's theology, I suppose you could say mainly or basically, that it is Reformed, but not all is quite the same. He has a view of the Trinity that no theologian that I know, no orthodox theologian I know of, has ever come up with at all. He holds that God is not only three persons in one substance to use that horrible Latin word that doesn't mean anything. He holds that God is both three persons and one person. And he explicitly denounces the usual apologetic defending the doctrine of the Trinity which is that God is three in one sense, and one in another sense, and hence there is no contradiction because there are lots of things that are three in one sense and one in another. You can get all sorts of examples. The easiest one to think of is a business corporation that has three officers. President, Vice-President, and Secretary Treasurer. And here the corporation is one corporation but three officers. And you can have one godhead and three persons. Or all sorts of combinations where you have three in one, but in different senses. And that is the standard orthodox position all the way back from Athanasius. Van Til denounces this. And says that the Trinity is both one person and three persons. And he calls this a paradox. Which is putting it mildly." – Gordon H. Clark, "John Frame and Cornelius Van Til", audio lecture.

9. The Role of the Senses.

Clark rejects any empirical notion that the senses provide man with knowledge.

Van Til it seems (and his student Bahnsen more certainly) believes that knowledge can come through the senses. [I'd be glad to be correct on this or be given quotes from Van Til that support it.]

Van Til wrote, "It is customary on the part of some orthodox theologians to depreciate the objects of sensation as a source of knowledge. They have become deeply convinced of the skepticism involved in historical empiricism. They would therefore substitute an a priori approach for that of the empiricist,

thinking that thus they represent biblical thought." – Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979.

10. Whether Logic is Created or Uncreated.

Concerned as usual with upholding his view of the creator-creature relationship, Van Til could not have it that the logic used by a right-thinking man is the same as the logic used by God. "The law of contradiction, therefore, as we know it, is but the expression on a created level of the internal coherence of God's nature. [...] Christians should employ the law of contradiction, whether positively or negatively, as a means by which to systematize the facts of revelation." – Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 11.

"The laws of logic as God had created them in the universe were not broken by sin..." – Cornelius Van Til, In Defense of the Faith, p.92.

For Clark, logic is the way God thinks. "The law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking." – Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, p. 67. Since logic is how God thinks and He is eternal, for Clark logic is uncreated.

"This sort of thing occurs in the controversy which Van Til and I engaged in for some years. He would say that I make logic superior to God. Well, that's sorta nonsense. Logic is the way God thinks. And God's thinking isn't superior to him, that's the way He is." – Gordon H. Clark, "John Frame and Cornelius Van Til", audio lecture.

11. How Knowledge is Justified.

Clark is an externalist, Van Til is an internalist. That is, Clark held that the justification of true beliefs which makes them knowledge is by factors outside of man – namely, the Holy Spirit enlightening the mind to propositions of the Scriptures. This issue was never debated between the two men, but is an observation from studying their respective epistemologies.

12. Eschatology

Clark was a historic premillenialist, Van Til an amillennialist.

"The present volume advocates premillennialism, though in a manner that many premillenarians will not like. For it is to be feared that premillenarians are their own worst enemies. Why may become somewhat clear as the end approaches. At any rate, the argument of the present volume is not so much that the Bible teaches it unmistakably, as that postmilennialism and amillennialism can in no way be fitted into the Biblical data, and hence only premillenarianism is left." – Gordon H. Clark, "Eschatology," First Lessons in Theology.

13. Lapsarianism (the Logical Order of God's decrees)

Clark held to a form of surpalapsarianism. See here: https://douglasdouma.com/2014/06/02/the-supralapsarianism-of-gordon-h-clark/

Van Til held to infralapsarianism.

Edit 9/12/2017 – Van Til actually seems to have held to neither infralapsarianism nor supralapsarianism, preferring instead to "Avoid extremes," and references Bavinck for his position. See: Van Til, *Common Grace & The Gospel*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972, p. 145-146.

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24 thoughts on "A List of Differences Between the Thought of Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til"



"The Presbyterian Philosopher, Wipf & Stock, 2017." Has the day finally come?

Reply



January or February, so says the publisher.

Reply



Dear Doug:

Another very interesting post. : –)

- 1. Regarding your request for confirmation from Cornelius Van Til's [The Defense of the Faith]: I own a copy of the Third Edition, and there is nothing on page 50 of my copy about Van Til saying we must presuppose the Triune God.
- 2. Both Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til have very high view of the Bible and inerrancy.

There is no doubt that in Gordon Clark's philosophy, epistemology comes first.

I am not sure Cornelius Van Til has it the opposite way where ontology comes before epistemology. (Van Til [1955] 1967, 9): "Naturally in the system of theology and in apologetics the doctrine of God is of fundamental importance. We must first ask what kind of a God Christianity believes in before we can really ask with intelligence whether such a God exists. The 'what' precedes the 'that'; the connotation precedes the denotation; at least the latter cannot be discussed intelligently without at once considering the former."

I suppose it is like solving a set of simultaneously equations for Van Til where semantics, epistemology and ontology are equations in the set.

Michael Horton the Van Tillian, on the other hand, boldly declares (2011, 47): "Epistemology follows ontology. In other words, our theory of how we know anything depends on what we think there is to be known."

References:

Horton, Michael. 2011. The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

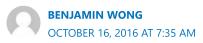
Van Til, Cornelius. [1955] 1967. The Defense of the Faith. 3rd ed. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Wong

Reply

Pingback: A List of Differences Between the Thought of Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til – A man after God's own heart



Dear Doug:

Just a remark about the distinction between the object and content of knowledge:

When the objects under consideration are mental entities, the object is identical to the content.

Since the object is identical to the content for mental entities, is it any wonder that Van Tilians are unable to separate the two?

Gordon Clark was right.

Sincerely,

Benjamin

Reply



Doug:

I have Defense of the Faith and will look for the quote this afternoon.

Nathan

>

Reply



Interesting, I recalled some of the points you covered being discuss in John W. Robbins's Booklet "Cornelius Van Til: the Man and The Myth".

In the booklet, Dr. Robbins discussed Van Til's view of Logic, God's incomprehensibility, Trinity and validity of Theistic evidence.

I wonder why You did not add the doctrine of the Incarnation as a difference between them.

Ben Mullikin typing as Mark Howard's Filer

Reply



I forgot about the difference on the incarnation. Clark's view, however, was unique. So it is a difference between him and everybody else!

Reply



Clark wasn't an externalist. He was an internalist.

Reply



A few have come to that conclusion (though more recently have voted "externalist"). I think those who argue for Clark being an internalist are mistaken though. My arguments are on parts 5 and 6 of this post: https://douglasdouma.com/2016/09/28/elements-of-gordon-clarks-theory-of-knowledge/

Reply



"The internalist says that if a person knows P, he must also know how to justify P. He must be able to access (i.e. be aware of) the justification for P. The externalist says that one might have access to the justification for P but he might not."

You're dealing with a faulty definition for starters. Per Stanford regarding the internalist, "The key idea is that the person either is or can be aware of this basis." The potential awareness implied by "can be aware" presupposes the knower may not be aware. Yet your definition is "he must also know... (i.e. be aware of...)"

But aside from that, you say, "The internalist requires one to have the ability to demonstrate knowledge in order for it to be knowledge, but Clark does not put that stipulation on knowledge." Not only is that not a true depiction of internalism as just shown, Scripturalism presupposes internalism. Lastly, the two concepts aren't *exhaustively* mutually exclusive. BUT, the way they are properly defined, Scripturalists can't be an externalist. They can only be classified as I's.

Reply



how so?

Reply

Pingback: A List of Differences Between the Thought of Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til – Scripturalism



The Christian Presupposition...

It is probably more accurate to say that Van Til argued that what must be presupposed is the Triune God who reveals Himself in the self-attesting Scripture. I do not recall him ever claiming that any "God" concept was to stand independent of His self-revelation. The two are bound up together in his system. Somewhere I recall him talking about special revelation as a "pre-interpretation" in discussing this relationship to the basic presuppositions. I will see if I can find a specific quote.

Reply



Yes, as I noted in the post "In other places he says we must presupposes the triune God "of the Scriptures."

Reply



Sorry, I did not meant to imply that your statement was inaccurate. I only wanted to point out that a critical part of Van Til's emphasis was not just presupposing the God of the Bible, but rather God as the revealer (or interpreter) of Himself and the world. Of course, one implies the other.

Here are a couple quotes supporting your point...

"The Protestant principle finds this in the self-contained ontological trinity. By his counsel the triune God controls whatsoever comes to pass. If then the human consciousness must, in the nature of the case, always be the proximate starting-point, it remains true that God is always the most basic and therefore the ultimate or final reference point in human interpretation."

Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1955).

He also reaffirms this idea in his interaction with other thinkers...

"But when he [Daane] would substitute "the revelation of God in Christ" for the ontological trinity as "the Christian's most basic interpretation," then I cannot follow him. For "the revelation of God in Christ" is a relation of God to the world."

Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1955).

Despite the quote above making a distinction between God's revelation in Christ to the world as distinct from the self-relational ontological Trinity, elsewhere seems to indicate that the revelation of Christ is functionally equivalent to the "ontological Trinity" at least in terms of our understanding of the world and ourselves...

"Unless the unbeliever repents and in humble faith accepts the authority of the self-attesting Christ as he speaks in Scripture, he can say nothing about himself as the interpreter of the world or about the world as interpreted by himself." As you know, consistent definitions and formulations were not his strong point! Cornelius Van Til, A Christian Theory of Knowledge. (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1969).

Reply



The idea that Gordon H. Clark did not regard Arminianism as heretical is problematic because simply saying that several of his supporters did not regard Arminianism as heretical does not demonstrate that it

was also Clark's view. Clark continually refuted Arminianism and semi-Arminianism. He was forced out of Wheaton College for refuting Arminianism and he was forced out of Westminister Theological Seminary for refuting Van Til's neo-orthodoxy and the semi-Arminian views of the Christian Reformed Church and it's three points of common grace, the well meant offer, and the free offer of the Gospel. Van Til's supporters use their theology of paradox to promote a view that is halfway between the Reformed position and Arminianism, which is why Clark called it semi-Arminianism. Clark was very clear on his view that Van Til's view is not Reformed and your own appendendix to your book proves it. Clark stated that fact clearly, yet you contend that Murray and other supporters of Van Til modified their view. Clark says their modifications did not change their view whatever and he still contended that the Van Tilians were denying the special revelation of Scripture just as the Barthians do.

Reply



Charlie, I go into Clark's view on Arminianism in greater detail here: https://douglasdouma.com/2016/10/03/gordon-clark-and-the-salvation-of-arminians/

Reply



Cornelius Van Til was not a good theologian because he was constantly contradicting himself.

Reply



I agree with Clark on propositional over analogical. I don't agree with with Clark that God had no emotions. Grieved that he made man of earth (flood) Jesus wept, Jesus thirst(not an emotion, but an emotional response). He loved Lazzarus and Martha and Mary; and many more as you read the scriptures.

I oppose Van Til teachings and all that goes with the territory. Clark should have been read scriptures to understand how Lord condences in our inability and sorrow, sin and depravity.

Reply



I've put together some of Dr. Clark's quotes on "emotion" here so that his view might be better understood: https://douglasdouma.com/2017/11/29/gordon-clarks-view-of-emotion/

Reply



A man of sorrow acquainted with Grief Isaiah53 vs. 3

Reply



why did you delete my former coment?

Reply



It should be visible now. I apparently did not "approve" it properly on the first try.

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