

THE IMPLICATIONS OF A CLARKIAN EPISTEMOLOGY IN THEOLOGY:
A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF THE WRITINGS OF DR. ROBERT REYMOND

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Introduction

In recent years Robert Reymond has introduced a number of books to the Church. These works, including *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, *Paul: Missionary-Theologian*, and *John: Beloved Disciple*, demonstrate a sincere desire to uphold Biblical truth, especially that theology which was recovered in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. I am personally indebted to Dr. Reymond¹ for forcing me to think through many issues from a distinctly Biblical perspective.

Having said this, I believe that his writings exhibit weaknesses at certain points which demonstrate a flawed epistemology and inconsistency with the truth of Scripture. It is my contention that these weaknesses, if uncorrected, will severely limit the future usefulness of Reymond's writings in advancing the cause of truth. It is therefore in a spirit of humble gratitude and desire to further the usefulness of his writings that I offer the following critique of Reymond's epistemology and some of its out-workings. Space does not allow a comprehensive analysis of each of Reymond's writings, but examples will be drawn from the books mentioned above.

Reymond's Epistemological Blunder

In his writings, Reymond makes no secret of his epistemological position. In chapter four of his systematic theology, "The Fact of Divine Revelation", Reymond makes clear that he holds to the epistemology put forth by Gordon Clark in the twentieth century. In holding to this position, Reymond self-consciously follows Clark's lead in rejecting the presuppositional epistemology of Cornelius Van Til. While it is not the purpose of this paper to examine the Clark/Van Til controversy in detail, any analysis of its effects on Reymond's theology requires a

¹ Henceforth simply "Reymond", out of convention rather than disrespect.

brief overview.²

As a cursory reading of Reymond's chapter reveals, the controversy revolves around the relationship between human reason and divine revelation. Van Til sought to spell out very clearly the Biblical relationship between reason and revelation in his book, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*. It is telling that in Reymond's presentation of Van Til's position, he never references this, perhaps the most explicit and comprehensive explanation of Van Til's epistemology. Van Til opens his book by stating that revelation is the only context for true knowledge:

According to Scripture, God has created the “universe.” God has created time and space. God has created all the “facts” of science. God has created the human mind. In this human mind God has laid down the laws of thought according to which it is to operate. In the facts of science God has laid the laws of being according to which they function. In other words, the impress of God's plan is upon his whole creation.

We may therefore characterize this whole situation by saying that the creation of God is a revelation of God. God revealed himself in nature and God also revealed himself in the mind of man. Thus it is impossible for the mind of man to function except in an atmosphere of revelation. And every thought of man when it functioned normally in this atmosphere of revelation would express the truth as laid in the creation by God. We may therefore call a Christian epistemology a *revelational epistemology*.³

Thus for Van Til, man's knowledge is totally dependent upon God's and is consequently qualitatively different from God's.

Reymond betrays his misunderstanding of Van Til in his analysis of what Van Til means by this “qualitative difference.” Reymond asserts that Van Til's “qualitative difference” equates rejecting any true correspondence between God's knowledge and man's. This, according to Reymond destroys the very concept of meaningful revelation and leads to “equivocality and no

² Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 95-110.

³ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, vol. 2 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., n.d.), 1.

true knowledge at all.”⁴ That this could be an honest effort to understand Van Til's meaning seems incredible in light of Van Til's emphasis on the significance of revelation for the reality of true human knowledge:

True human knowledge corresponds to the knowledge which God has of himself and his world. Suppose that I am a scientist investigating the life of a cow. What is a cow? I say it is an animal. But that only pushes the question back. What is an animal? To answer that question I must know what life is. But again, to know what life is I must know how it is related to the inorganic world. And so I may and must continue till I reach the borders of the universe. And even when I have reached the borders of the universe, I do not yet know what a cow is. Complete knowledge of what a cow is can be had only by an absolute intelligence, i.e., by one who has, so to speak, the blueprint of the whole universe. But it does not follow from this that the knowledge of the cow that I have is not true as far as it goes. It is true if it corresponds to the knowledge that God has of the cow.⁵

This statement makes clear what Van Til means by the qualitative difference between God's knowledge and man's. Van Til simply means that we can never know anything originally as God does because he alone is omniscient. Because of the impossibility of true *original* knowledge for man, Van Til described man's knowledge as “analogical, i.e., based upon the knowledge that God has of himself and of the world.”⁶ Our knowledge is possible because God has revealed certain truths to us, which we are to believe. To this extent, Reymond's controversy with Van Til on this issue is based on his own misunderstanding.

Although Van Til does not deny the reality of meaningful revelation, there is in fact a real difference between his epistemology and Reymond's. This is made very apparent in the second section of Reymond's chapter, “The Nature of Biblical Truth”, which bears the heading, “Paradox as a Hermeneutical Category”. In this section, Reymond deals with the relationship between the facts of revelation.

⁴ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 98-99.

⁵ Van Til, *Survey*, 1-2.

⁶ Van Til, *Survey*, 200.

In addressing this subject, Van Til was consistent with the proposition that man's knowledge is totally dependent upon God's knowledge. In Van Til's explanation of knowledge, not only do the individual facts of knowledge depend upon omniscience, but the ability to see these facts in their proper relation to one another does as well. Van Til described the proper relation between one item of knowledge and another as "coherence." Because all facts must be known to see the proper relationship between one fact and another, we are dependent upon revelation to show us the proper relationship between the facts of revelation. Thus true "coherence" or consistency in our thinking can only be achieved by patterning our thoughts after God's thoughts which are revealed to us:

God is completely self-conscious and therefore knows himself and all things analytically. There is in God's thought complete coherence. Keeping this in mind, we may say that if we are to have coherence in our thinking it will have to be a coherence that corresponds to God's coherence. Accordingly, our coherence will never be completely inclusive in the way that God's coherence is completely inclusive. Our coherence will be no more than an analogy of the coherence of God. Yet because it is based upon God's coherence it will be true knowledge. Our coherence can constantly grow in comprehensiveness but it cannot grow in truthfulness. Those that have the least knowledge have true knowledge just as well as those who have the greatest knowledge, if only their knowledge is truly analogical, i.e., based upon the knowledge that God has of himself.⁷

The understanding that omniscience alone can properly relate facts to one another has tremendous significance for the issue of paradox.⁸ Van Til understood that revelation will often confront man with facts which he as a creature cannot properly relate to one another. Man must receive the facts of revelation pre-related in the understanding that these facts, together with the many which are not revealed, all cohere in perfect consistency before the mind of God.

Reymond, in marked contrast to this position, insists that the facts of revelation must not

⁷ Van Til, *Survey*, 200.

⁸ Understood throughout this paper as two or more revealed truths, which while perfectly consistent in reality, defy man's ability to reason from one to the other in a logical fashion.

only come as the self-attesting correspondents of God's knowledge, free of all true contradiction, but must be reconcilable “before the bar of human reason.”⁹ Reymond reasons this from his understanding that “God is rational, that is, he is logical.”¹⁰ Van Til can be found making a similar statement, “To be sure, all men have the law of contradiction in common in the sense that all men, as creatures made in the image of God, cannot but function in a universe that embodies the ordinances of God.”¹¹ Given that both Reymond and Van Til hold to the rational nature of God's character it is striking to note the widely divergent conclusions that each draws.

Van Til concludes, that because man is a finite creature and works with a severely limited number of propositions, the success of his attempts to logically relate the propositions of revelation to one another must be limited to the same extent:

[Antinomies] are involved in the fact that human knowledge can never be completely comprehensive knowledge. Every knowledge transaction has in it somewhere a reference point to God. Now since God is not fully comprehensible to us, we are bound to come into what seems to be contradictions in all our knowledge. Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical [that is apparently though not really contradictory].¹²

Reymond, on the other hand, holds that the coherence of fact with fact in man's knowledge may be established on the creaturely level by the laws of logic. The huge oversight of Reymond's position is that for logic to arrive truthfully at the correct conclusion, the entire body of premises must be known. It is in this point that Reymond fails to abide by his own confession of being “in total agreement” with Van Til's belief that “God's knowledge [is] prior to and necessary to man's knowledge, which is always secondary and derivative.” Reymond does not believe that man's

⁹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 109.

¹⁰ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 109.

¹¹ Van Til, *Survey*, 189-190.

¹² Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), 9. Quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 104.

knowledge is derivative when it comes to establishing the relationship between one fact of revelation and another. Here through the use of logic, man may determine what may or may not be a revealed fact according to whether or not he can adequately relate it to the other facts in his possession.¹³

The practical significance of this position becomes apparent when one considers that for Reymond to deny the existence of revealed truths which defy human logic in their relationship, when confronted by two apparently contradictory truths Reymond must either deny one of the propositions in question, or else redefine the issues in such a way that they seem logical “before the bar of human reason.” Van Til anticipated this very danger of altering the facts of revelation in pursuit of a coherence that appealed to man's logic. “When we think of human knowledge, correspondence is of primary importance. If there is to be true coherence in our knowledge, there must be correspondence between our ideas of facts and God's ideas of these facts.”¹⁴ We might say that Van Til understood that truths must be logically related because they are revealed, where for Clark and Reymond we can acknowledge that something is revealed only if we can see its logical relationship.

The Westminster Confession of Faith indicates the proper relationship between logic and revelation. “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture...”¹⁵ Concerning this logical deduction, the confession ascribes two modifiers, it must be both good and necessary. This of itself shows us

¹³ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 105-108.

¹⁴ Van Til, *Survey*, 3.

¹⁵ Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), Chapter 1, Paragraph VI.

that the Westminster divines did not believe one could take just any revealed truths as propositions and logically arrive at a legitimate conclusion. Our discussion above gives us the reason why this must be so. Any logical syllogism that does not appropriate all the correct premises cannot arrive at a true conclusion. Thus for a logical consequence to be a good one, Scripture must provide us with all the necessary premises. For it to be a necessary one, Scripture must require it of us. In other words, “good and necessary consequence” realizes a conclusion that is already within the bounds of revelation. In this sense, logic certainly plays a role in understanding God's revelation, but it is a limited role, always subordinated to the self-attesting authority of God's revelation.

This truth, which has been worked out in general principles above, is made certain by the clear examples in Scripture which have been left for our instruction. To begin with, consider the three friends of Job. When one reads the book of Job and notices the chain of reasoning that these men employed, it becomes apparent that they, on a practical level, believed that logic was a sufficient tool to explain the revelation of God. In this sense Job's friends were proto-Clarkian in their epistemology. A syllogistic summary of their argument might look like this:

- ❖ God judges sin, not righteousness.
- ❖ God is judging you, Job.
- ❖ Therefore, you must have sinned.

Here we have a logically sound piece of argument, and yet how flawed was the conclusion! The confidence of these men in their logic to interpret the revelation of God was sadly misplaced.

One hears echoes of Clark and Reymond in the words of Eliphaz, “Is it for your fear of him that he reproves you and enters into judgment with you? Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities.”¹⁶ God's assessment of such presumption is sobering. For all the correctness of

¹⁶ Job 22:4-5.

their logic, God rebuked Eliphaz and his friends: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”¹⁷ It would seem that we need to remember the inspired admonition of the wise father in this matter:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.¹⁸

It is important to remember that we are not advocating “irrationality” as Reymond implies must be the case.¹⁹ As Van Til understood, coherence in our knowledge is not abandoned but secured by trusting that God has properly related such truths as he has revealed to us. In illustration of this, consider the example of Abraham when God commanded him to sacrifice his son.²⁰ How would Abraham have proceeded on Reymond's platform? Reymond avers that it is merely the “erring exegete” who understands the facts of revelation in such a way that they are apparent contradictories though reconciled to the mind of God.²¹ However, Scripture commends Abraham's unquestioning obedience as an act of supreme faith which demonstrated genuine fear of God.²² On the level of human understanding, it is difficult to see how Abraham could have reconciled this command with the clear prohibition against killing one made in the image of God.²³ What we witness in Abraham is the implicit faith that submits the reconciliation of these

¹⁷ Job 42:7.

¹⁸ Proverbs 3:5-6.

¹⁹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 106-107.

²⁰ Genesis 22:1-19. A similar example would be God's command that Hosea marry a prostitute, found in Hosea 1:2 and 3:1-3.

²¹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 108.

²² Genesis 22:11-12, James 2:21-23, Hebrews 11:17-19.

²³ Genesis 9:5-6 is sufficient warrant for this statement, although we should also understand that the moral law of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments was not unknown to Adam and his descendents.

two propositions to God. It was enough for Abraham to know that it was God who had spoken. When this is understood, Abraham's obedience to God's strange-seeming command was the only rational course open to him. Abraham's example stands in marked contrast to the model that Clark and Reymond have put forth. It is difficult to imagine Clark or Reymond being able to explain God's commendation of Abraham's actions given their insistence that true revelation cannot even appear as contradictory to itself.

Perhaps Reymond would have us regard such examples as extraordinary and therefore not normative for our understanding of revelation. To this objection we reply that Scripture does not regard Abraham's unquestioning reception of revelation as extraordinary. To the contrary, his reception of apparently contradictory revelation and subsequent obedience is held up as a model of faith.²⁴ It is of such a faith that Scripture speaks when describing Christians as those who “walk by faith and not by sight.”²⁵ Faith that only advances as far as the “bar of human reason” can verify, is no faith at all, but is simply a form of walking by sight.

Finally, Reymond's argument that because God is rational, he must appear as logical to the mind of man cannot legitimately be limited to the words of revelation. God is rational and consistent in all his actions as well. Since God rules over all things, this would require that not only must all the words of revelation appear logically related to one another, but they must appear logically related to our experience as well. Such a supposition is absurd. How can we logically trace the ways of the one who “makes darkness his covering, his canopy around him?”²⁶ There are many experiences that man will confront which he cannot logically reconcile

²⁴ Hebrews 11:17-19.

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:7.

²⁶ Psalm 18:11.

with the words of revelation. Job's experience, referenced above, is sufficient proof of this.²⁷ “Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”²⁸

It would seem that Reymond sensed the direction of his own argument from the caution he gives at the end of his appeal for Clark's epistemology. “Let no one conclude from this rejection of paradox...that I am urging a Cartesian rationalism that presupposes the autonomy of human reason and freedom from divine revelation, a rationalism which asserts that it must begin with itself in the build-up of knowledge.”²⁹ Although Reymond may not be guilty of an outright denial of the place of revelation as the foundation of human knowledge, he is guilty of allowing human reason autonomy in evaluating the relationships between the facts of revelation and thereby in evaluating the meaning of revelation itself. Reymond's appeal to the law of contradiction in this connection³⁰ betrays an autonomous understanding of what contradiction truly is. As Van Til explains in his argument against the antitheist:

We hold that they have falsely assumed that the self-contradictory is to be identified with that which is beyond the comprehension of man. But this takes for granted that human categories are ultimate categories – which is just the thing in question. We must maintain that we have the true conception of the law of contradiction. According to that conception, only that is self-contradictory which is contradictory to the conception of the absolute self-consciousness of God.³¹

Reymond's contention that to accept that certain aspects of revelation cannot be logically related

²⁷ See also the turmoil of Asaph in Psalm 73:1-17. Only when he looked to God in worship could he rise above this apparent contradiction. Forsaking his own attempt to find a logical explanation for the prosperity of the wicked, Asaph found peace in understanding that God's faithfulness does not depend upon our understanding of his ways. God would make all things right in his own time.

²⁸ Romans 11:33.

²⁹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 109.

³⁰ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 109.

³¹ Van Til, *Survey*, 206.

together in the mind of man results in “the death of all rational faith,”³² therefore betrays his acceptance of the premise that in the realm of logic, human categories are ultimate. This premise is not consistent with a truly Christian theistic perspective.

In conclusion, if the facts of revelation must stand in a logical relationship before men, then not only will men disallow or reinterpret what they cannot reconcile, regardless of how clearly these facts may appear in God's revelation, but men may use their reason to extend beyond the boundaries of revealed truth through logical consequence. Some of the errors and foolishness to which such an epistemology can lead will be considered in the following sections.

Reymond's Theological Innovations

Reymond's Doctrine of the Trinity

Of all the doctrines of Scripture, the Trinity is perhaps the most basic and, at the same time, the most resistant to man's attempts at explanation in human categories. Reymond appears to be so sensitive of this fact that he engages Van Til on this subject in the very context of setting forth a Clarkian epistemology. On this subject Reymond writes,

But does not the classical doctrine of the Trinity present, if not a real contradiction, at least an apparent one? The widely acclaimed “paradox” of the Trinity – namely that three equals one and one equals three – is in fact not one at all. If the numerical adjectives “one” and “three” are intended to describe in both cases the same noun so that the theologians say that one God equals three Gods and three Gods equal one God in the same way that one might say that one apple numerically equals three apples and three apples numerically equals one apple, this is not an apparent contradiction or paradox. This is a real contradiction which not even God can resolve! Nor would he even try to do so! But this is not what the church teaches by its doctrine of the Trinity, although this representation is advanced all too often not only by lay people but also by good theologians. For example, rejecting the traditional distinction that God is one in one sense (essence) and three in another sense (persons), Van Til writes:

God is a *one-conscious being*, and yet he is a three-conscious being...the work

³² Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 107.

ascribed to any of the persons is the work of *one absolute person*.... It is sometimes asserted that we can prove to men that we are not asserting anything that they ought to consider irrational, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in person. We therefore claim that we have not asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing.

Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. *We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person* ... within the ontological Trinity we must maintain that God is numerically one. He is *one person*.... Yet within *the being of the one person* we are permitted and compelled by Scripture to make the distinction between a specific or generic type of being, and *three personal subsistences*.

But no orthodox creed has ever so represented the doctrine. In fact, it is apparent that all of the historic creeds of the church have been exceedingly jealous to avoid the very appearance of contradiction here by employing one noun – “God” or “Godhead” – with the numeral “one” and another noun – “persons” – with the numeral “three.”³³

In response to Reymond’s statement above, several things need to be noted. First, Reymond has misrepresented Van Til’s position by asserting that he is teaching that “one God equals three Gods and three Gods equal one God in the same way that one might say that one apple numerically equals three apples and three apples numerically equals one apple.”³⁴ Van Til says no such thing, as a careful reading even of the selection that Reymond quoted will verify. Van Til was concerned that there were rationalistic theologians who were capitalizing on the limited vocabulary used to define the Trinity in a way that denied the very doctrine that it was intended to represent, that God is one in a personal sense. Contrary to Reymond’s claim that “no orthodox creed has ever so represented the doctrine” as Van Til had, it is Reymond’s view of the Trinity which proves to be unorthodox.

Perhaps the most telling summary of Reymond’s view of the doctrine of the Trinity can be found in his book *John, Beloved Disciple*. Here Reymond addresses the specific question at

³³ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 108-109. (Quote from Van Til is cited by Reymond as follows: Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith*, vol. 5, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 220, 228, 229-230, emphasis supplied by Reymond.)

³⁴ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 108.

hand: “How should we conceive of the relationship of the three persons to the one God, that is to say, how should we relate God’s ‘threeness’ to his ‘oneness’?” Following Clark’s lead Reymond asserts that the unity of the three Persons is nothing more than the unity of genus or species, a sharing of the “attributes of deity”:³⁵

To the objection of Hodge and Berkhof that the unity in the Godhead cannot be the unity of a species or a genus, that is to say, ‘the three Persons are one in a stricter, deeper, more inexplicable sense than the sense in which three or thirty men are one,’ Clark responds:

Whether this objection is plausibly true or not depends on the sense in which man are one and the sense in which the Trinity is one. Those who make this objection should define the two senses (if indeed there are two) and point out the distinction. Unless we know how the Persons [of the Godhead] are one and how men are one, we cannot tell whether the unity is the same or different. But the objectors hardly define specific unity and disclaim ability to define divine unity

Hodge... wrote (II, p. 59), ‘The whole nature or essence [of God] is in the divine person [each one], but the human person [each one] is only a part of the common human nature.’ This is a confusing sentence. To fit the argument, it ought to read, ‘The whole nature or essence [of God] is in the divine person, but only a part of the common human nature is in the human person.’ If the sentence is not so interpreted, the antithesis between the unity in God and the unity in men, vanishes. Yet this interpretation, the only one that preserves the antithesis, makes the second half of the sentence false...³⁶

Reymond gives this explanation his imprimatur, “Clark is quite correct of course in his observation.” We see in Clark’s reasoning a clear example of Reymond’s epistemology at work. If Clark cannot understand how the Persons of the Godhead are united in a manner different from how men are united in their human nature, he cannot acknowledge that such a difference is possible. Here is Reymond’s logic controlling revelation.³⁷

The view that the unity of the Godhead is merely a unity of species is not a new one. In

³⁵ Reymond, *John: Beloved Disciple* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, Mentor, 2001), 81-82.

³⁶ Reymond, *John*, 84.

³⁷ Reymond, *John*, 82.

fact, historically this view has been recognized as leading to tritheism and it has been the express intention of those who fashioned the orthodox creeds of the church to avoid such a view. As early as the Nicene period, in asserting the consubstantiality of the Son and the consequent distinction between the Son and the Father, it was understood that such a distinction could not be held in an absolute fashion:

Consubstantiality among men, indeed, is predicated of different individuals who partake of the same nature, and the term in this view might denote also unity of species in a tritheistic sense.

But in the case before us the personal distinction of the Son from the Father must not be pressed to a duality of substances of the same kind; the homoousion, on the contrary, must be understood as identity or *numerical* unity of substance, in distinction from mere generic unity. Otherwise it leads manifestly into dualism or tritheism. The Nicene doctrine refuses to swerve from the monotheistic basis, and stands between Sabellianism and tritheism; though it must be admitted that the usage of *οὐσία* and *ὑπόστασις* still wavered for a time, and the relation of the consubstantiality to the numerical unity of the divine essence did not come clearly out till a later day. Athanasius insists that the unity of the divine essence is indivisible, and that there is only one principle of Godhead...

But in the divine Trinity consubstantiality denotes not only sameness of kind, but at the same time *numerical* unity; not merely the *unum in specie*, but also the *unum in numero*. The three persons are related to the divine substance not as three individuals to their species, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or Peter, John, and Paul, to the human nature; they are only one God. The divine substance is absolutely indivisible by reason of its simplicity, and absolutely inextensible and untransferable by reason of its infinity; whereas a corporeal substance can be divided, and the human nature can be multiplied by generation... The church teaches not *one* divine essence *and* three persons, but *one* essence *in* three persons. Father, Son, and Spirit cannot be conceived as three separate individuals, but are in one another, and form a solidaric unity.³⁸

Van Til was seeking to guard this understanding that God in his “oneness” is a personal being rather than an impersonal class of attributes. It has long been the understanding that the vocabulary of “essence” and “persons” used to distinguish between the oneness and threeness

³⁸ Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity: AD 311-590*, vol. 3 of *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2006), 656-657, 673. Schaff provides a number of footnotes documenting passages in the early church fathers where these issues are specifically addressed. These footnotes also reference an extensive body of literature that has been compiled over the years dealing with these issues. It would seem that Clark’s request that someone demonstrate the difference between the unity of the Trinity and that of the human race had already been satisfied.

within the Godhead is limited and cannot stand alone as a sufficient explanation of the Trinity:

The orthodox doctrine forsook Sabellianism or modalism, which, it is true, made Father, Son, and Spirit strictly coordinate, but only as different denominations and forms of manifestation of the one God.

But, on the other hand, as we have already intimated, the term *person* must not be taken here in the sense current among men, as if the three persons were three different individuals, or three self-conscious and separately acting beings. The Trinitarian idea of personality lies midway between that of a mere form of manifestation, or a personation, which would lead to Sabellianism, and the idea of an independent, limited human personality, which would result in tritheism... The word *person* is in reality only a make-shift, in the absence of a more adequate term. Our idea of God is more true and deep than our terminology, and the essence and character of God far transcends our highest ideas.³⁹

Thus, in the interest of avoiding the difficulty of seeing God as personal in his oneness and his threeness, Clark and Reymond end up standing at odds with the historic orthodox understanding of the Trinity, the very thing of which Reymond accused Van Til!

As we have just seen, Reymond's denial that God is a "one-conscious being" renders God impersonal on the level of his "oneness". Not only is such a view at variance with the historic understanding of the Trinity, but as might be expected, it cannot account for the most fundamental tenet of the Christian faith: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"⁴⁰ This grand statement affirms that YHWH, the personal God of the old covenant, is one. This one God is a God who commands, loves, chooses and swears. Throughout this passage, when referencing the entire Trinity, Scripture uses third-person singular verbs and pronouns. The basic grammar of this passage, and indeed of the whole of Scripture, becomes inexplicable if God is not personal at the level of his unity. Despite Reymond's claims to the contrary, by denying the personal aspect of God's "oneness", he rejects the historic orthodox understanding of the doctrine; he denies the clear testimony of Scripture; and he is left with a doctrine of the

³⁹ Schaff, 676-677.

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 6:4.

Trinity that cannot successfully be distinguished from tritheism.⁴¹

Reymond's Doctrine of the Decrees of God

In chapter 13, “God’s Eternal Plan of Salvation”, Reymond addresses the subject of the decrees of God. Of particular interest in the current discussion is his section dealing with the order of God’s decrees. Reymond shows a commendable desire to guard the sovereignty of God throughout this discussion. Tragically, in the very interest of securing for God absolute freedom in his decrees and actions, Reymond denies God’s freedom to act and decree in a manner different from men.

On the subject of the order of God’s decrees, there have been two major theological camps within the Reformed tradition, infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism. These terms reflect the timing of God’s discriminating decree of election with reference to his decree of the fall. Infralapsarianism holds that God’s decrees mirror the historical progression of the events – that his election of some to salvation was after or below the decree of the fall. The chief principle of the infralapsarian position is that God only decrees judgment in the context of sin. Thus the motivation behind the infralapsarian position is to secure God’s justice in his sending individuals to damnation. Conversely, supralapsarianism holds that the decree of election was before or above that decree of the fall. The principal motivation behind the supralapsarian position is to maintain that God’s decrees are not contingent upon anything outside of himself.

Each of these positions has been held in one form or another by truly reformed and godly theologians. However, dealing as they do with the decrees of God, either of these positions can be guilty of trespassing the boundaries of revelation into “the secret things” that “belong to the

⁴¹ Reymond, *John*, 85.

Lord our God” if pressed too far.⁴²

The Westminster Confession of Faith provides a judicious treatment of this matter in its chapter dealing with the decrees of God. With respect to the reprobate, we read:

The rest of mankind God was pleased according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, *for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures*, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath, *for their sin*, to the praise of His glorious justice.⁴³

This statement safeguards the truths that each of the lapsarian positions seeks to maintain: God’s justice and God’s sovereign freedom. Beyond believing these important truths, the confession discourages ventures into the “unsearchable counsel of his will”. Not only do certain lapsarian positions venture to explain that which is unsearchable, but in seeking to establish a particular order to God’s decrees, they lose sight of the fact that God’s purpose is one and cannot be divided:

Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’⁴⁴

Not only does this passage teach the unity of God’s purpose, but it specifically tells us that God is like none other; indeed he declares, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.”⁴⁵

In contrast to the restraint of the Westminster Confession, Reymond’s treatment of this topic betrays his inordinate confidence in reason and logic to explain the ways of God. Reymond

⁴² Deuteronomy 29:29.

⁴³ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 3, Paragraph 7, emphasis supplied.

⁴⁴ Isaiah 46:8-10.

⁴⁵ Isaiah 55:8.

holds to a modified form of the supralapsarian order, which asserts that God must have planned and decreed in the same way that a rational man does:

All supralapsarians take seriously the biblical truth that God, as a rational God of purpose, must *necessarily* do all that he does purposively. It is inconceivable to them that God would decree to create the world for no purpose or would decree to create it for some purpose unrelated to his one final purpose. Accordingly, in light of their perception of the manner in which the rational mind plans and then executes its plan (and who will deny that God is rational, since the only alternative consistent with such denial is that he is irrational), the *more consistent* supralapsarians urge that the order of God's eternal plan is the precise inverse to the order in which he executes it.⁴⁶

Notice Reymond's assumption underlying his whole approach. The entire proposition stands or falls by the degree of correspondence that may be assumed between the manner in which men plan something and the manner in which God plans something. Reymond has created a false dilemma by asserting that the only alternative to accepting that God plans as men plan is to say he is irrational! There actually is another alternative. It is that God is infinite and thinks and acts on a totally different plane than frail, finite creatures of clay do. He tells us: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."⁴⁷ Reymond demonstrates an almost blasphemous presumption in his method of showing us how God must have logically arranged his decrees:

The rational mind recognizes that only in this way [a retrograde order] is each element of the plan purposive and contributory to the coherence of the entire plan. And God is a purposing planner!

To illustrate: suppose a rational planner decides to buy a car. This is the end that he will pursue. With his end determined, only then does he determine the appropriate means to achieve it. (A rational mind is actually capable of doing both instantaneously; by the phrase "only then" we intend a logical or teleological, not chronological order.) Never would a rational car buyer first leave home with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket, understanding his action to be a means to something, and *only then* determine the end which his action was intended to be a

⁴⁶ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 494.

⁴⁷ Isaiah 55:9.

means to. *The end always precedes the means in a rational mind.*⁴⁸

When Reymond attempts to explain the eternal counsel of God using the model of a man planning to buy a car, he reveals just how deeply his epistemology has influenced his theological method. Although Reymond would like to think of his argumentation as “legitimate ‘sanctified’ deductions ‘by good and necessary consequence’”, he has gone far beyond what the Westminster divines thought sustainable, the same divines who allowed for “good and necessary consequence.” Rather than looking to revelation to think God’s thoughts after him and so learn something of what rationality is, Reymond begins with what seems rational to a finite, fallen man and declares that this must be the way that God thinks. The contrast could not be more absolute. That Reymond could have reached correct conclusions on this subject seems highly doubtful, but he has certainly employed a faulty theological method which could legitimately yield as many different positions as there are perspectives on what seems rational to an individual.

Reymond’s Necessitated Determinism

Reymond also holds to a theory of God’s decrees which I have described as “necessitated determinism” for lack of a better term. In his discussion on the necessity of the atonement, Reymond first dismisses the idea that the atonement was only necessary because God chose it among many other means of saving sinners. Having dismissed the notion of such a merely hypothetical necessity, Reymond proceeds to consider the “consequent absolute necessity” view, a view which he ascribes to Francis Turretin, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, R. L. Dabney, Louis Berkhof, Oliver J. Buswell Jr., and John Murray.⁴⁹ Reymond allows John Murray to explain the expression:

⁴⁸ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 494, emphasis original.

⁴⁹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 665.

The word “consequent” in this designation points to the fact that God’s will or decree to save any is of free and sovereign grace. To save lost men *was not of absolute necessity* but of the sovereign good pleasure of God. The terms “absolute necessity,” however, indicate that God, *having elected some to everlasting life out of his mere good pleasure*, was under the necessity of accomplishing this purpose through the sacrifice of his own Son, a necessity arising from the perfections of his own nature. In a word, *while it was not inherently necessary for God to save*, yet, since salvation had been purposed, it was necessary to secure this salvation through a satisfaction that could be rendered only through substitutionary sacrifice and blood-bought redemption.⁵⁰

After showing some of the Biblical evidence pointing to the cross-work of Christ as the only suitable means of salvation, Reymond makes the following statement:

To this point I affirm all the above arguments for the “absolute necessity” of the atonement. My one problem is with Murray’s word “consequent,” for it suggests that God was perfectly free to save or not to save. . . . To propose that he could have purposed in any other way than he did is to suppose that God’s omniscience and his eternal decree could have been other than they are. To propose that anything could have been other than it is is to suppose that God could have been other than he is.⁵¹

Reymond, in making this statement, is once again allowing his logic to control his theology rather than organize it. Reymond begins with the understanding that God has done what he has done in the manner that would bring himself the most glory. From this, Reymond deduces that since God seeks his own glory in what he does, what God has done was the only option legitimately before him. God had no option but to elect certain people for salvation.

Although Reymond contends that this decree is still of “free and sovereign grace grounded in his sovereign good pleasure since no cause external to him forced him to decree as he did,”⁵² he has not succeeded in reconciling his conclusion with the clear witness of Scripture:

“He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, *according to the good*

⁵⁰ John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 11-12 quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 665, emphasis Reymond’s.

⁵¹ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 666-667.

⁵² Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 667.

*pleasure of his will. . . . He made know to us the mystery of his will, according to His good pleasure which he purposed in Him. . . . So then he has mercy on whom he desires and he hardens whom he desires. . . .*⁵³ These passages reveal God as being under no obligation to save sinners, not even one arising out of his own nature. Historically, this has been the Reformed position on the decrees of God as the many names associated with Murray's statement above testify. The Biblical emphasis on the freedom of God's choice in salvation is reflected in the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, *freely*, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. . . .⁵⁴

God's freedom in his decrees was the freedom to act in any way consistent with his character. That such a consistency with God's character may be maintained in more than one way is seen in God's differing treatments of sinners. Some he saves in a manner consistent with his character, while others he judges in a manner consistent with his character.

Following Reymond's line of reasoning that God had to elect certain individuals because of the perfections of His nature, one would also have to say that something in the very nature of God required him to create the world. Such an understanding of the decrees of God is incompatible with their being truly "free". "The decrees of God are *free*. He was not impelled to decree from any exigence of the divine nature; this would be to deny his self-sufficiency."⁵⁵ This understanding of God's freedom in his decrees is not an isolated one but has continued as the mainstream of Reformed theology for centuries. Concerning the decrees of God, A. W. Pink writes:

⁵³ Ephesians 1:5, 1:9 and Romans 9:18 respectively.

⁵⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 3, Paragraph 1, emphasis supplied.

⁵⁵ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications: 1998), 81, emphasis original.

Thirdly, they are *free*. “Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counselor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?” (Isa. 40:13-14). God was alone when he made his decrees, and his determinations were influenced by no external cause. *He was free to decree or not to decree, and to decree one thing and not another*. This liberty we must ascribe to him who is supreme, independent, and sovereign in all his doings.⁵⁶

Thus, Reymond, by his denial that “God was perfectly free to save or not to save,” cannot account for salvation being of God’s good pleasure and expressly rejects the historic Reformed position on this matter. It is a telling fruit of Reymond’s epistemology that his theology favors one man’s understanding of what is logical over the time-honored confessions and teaching of the Reformed church, even though they stand on the clear witness of Scripture.

Reymond’s Expository Case for a Clarkian Epistemology

Historically, the expository case for a Clarkian epistemology has been largely made from a certain translation of the Johannine *logos*. A summary of this argument may be found in Gordon Clark’s book on the subject:

Since verse 1 [of John’s gospel] is both difficult and important, since indeed the *Logos* is the subject of the present study, the general reader, though he has forgotten his high school Latin and never had Greek should patiently spend a few minutes on the mysteries of translation. The most pedestrian way to begin is to list the dictionary meanings of the Greek work *Logos*: “In the beginning was the *Logos*.” What can *Logos* mean? Jerome, whose translation was superior to all previous Latin translations, translated it as *verbum*, and this became *word* in English. But *verbum* is not the cognate form of *Logos*. *Verbum* is a digammated form of the Greek *eiroo*, and *eiroo* is the root for *rheema*, not *Logos*. Later in this study *rheema* will be considered. But here we translate *Logos*. Is *word* a good translation? ...

Now, in summary, the ordinary meaning of the Greek term, *i.e.*, the list in the lexicon, can fairly well be combined into the idea of thinking, or the expression of thought. The English cognate is Logic, the science of valid reasoning. ...

⁵⁶ Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 18, emphasis supplied.

Verse 4 says, [Speaking of John 1:4] “In him was life.” ... the verse says that the *Logos* was and still is the source of life. This life is hardly physical life: Mere physical life was taken care of under the previous reference to creation. Rather under the figure of speech that “this life is the light of men,” intellectual life must be meant. ... That the life referred to is rational life is supported by both verse 5 and verse 9, as will become clear, as well as by the previous main thought that Reason, Wisdom, or Logic is God.⁵⁷

There are many objections that might be raised against this translation. First, Clark’s methods make understandable his reference to “the mysteries of translation.” Clark begins by attempting to discredit “word” as an accurate translation of *logos* on the grounds that the English could not have come from the Greek directly but only through an inaccurate Latin translation. This charge on Clark’s part is groundless. Of the 330 occurrences of *logos* in the New Testament, the translation “word, words, or message” account for over 200 of them; “logic” is never considered an accurate translation.⁵⁸ Clark’s own mysterious method allows etymology undue control over his translation. The failure of etymology to preserve the true meaning of a cognate has been well established:

Extensive etymological studies are used less frequently today than previously because of two disadvantages: (1) the historical roots of words are often conjectural, and (2) the meanings of words often change radically with the passage of time, so that little or no apparent connection remains between the original meaning of the root word and its meaning a few hundred years later.

Several examples from the English language illustrates [sic.] this change. The English word *enthusiasm* originally meant “possessed by a god” and was so used until the early 1800s. When I pick a dandelion from my lawn I am not literally picking a “lion’s tooth,” although this is the meaning of the French phrase (*dent de lion*) from which the word is derived. When I describe someone as nice I do not mean that he is ignorant, even though this is the meaning of the Latin word *nescius* from which the word nice developed.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Gordon Clark, *The Johannine Logos: The Mind of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1989), 13, 18-19, 26-27.

⁵⁸ *The Greek-English Concordance to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997) s.v. “λογος.”

⁵⁹ Henry Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 100.

Clark wrongly capitalizes on cognitive similarity to effect a shift from *logos* to “logic,” from revelatory word to “the science of valid reasoning.” Clark goes so far as to state that “Logic is God.” When one considers this statement in light of the subtitle of his book “The Mind of Christ,” one can see that for Clark, logic rather than revelation has been manifested as the key to the divine mind. In light of the radical nature of such a shaky translation, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Clark, in search of Biblical evidence for a position he was previously committed to, employs eisegesis to reach it. A study of church history reveals that Clark’s equation of Logic with the second Person of the Trinity comes dangerously near to the heretic Marcellus’ description of the *Logos* as “an impersonal power, a reason inherent in God, inseparable from him, eternal, unbegotten, after the analogy of reason in man.”⁶⁰ In all this, Clark has failed to discredit the traditional translation of *logos* as the revelatory and personal Word of God. His own failed translation results in a failed argument.

Perhaps aware of these difficulties, Reymond does not emphasize Clark’s understanding of the Johannine *logos* in his argument for a Clarkian epistemology. In fact, Reymond does not so much exegetically defend his epistemology as assume it. The closest that Reymond comes to presenting an exegetical argument for his theory of logic comes in a rather backhanded way in his description of the conversion of Saul. Reymond begins his argument by describing Saul’s Damascus experience as the groundwork of his entire theology:

“Of course, his [Paul’s] conversion *initially* was more principal than substantive: firstly, since it originally amounted in content to little more than his new conscious faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Jewish Messiah (Acts 9:20, 22) plus the logical implicates of that new faith...⁶¹

⁶⁰ Schaff, 652.

⁶¹ Reymond, *Paul: Missionary-Theologian* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, Mentor, 2002), 61, emphasis original.

Later, in speaking of the source of Paul's theology, Reymond clearly shows his assumption that Paul's gospel was not so much indebted to any subsequent revelations from God, as to his own logical deductions:

All this means that the gospel he was proclaiming and the authority with which he was proclaiming it, he received neither from his Judaistic training before his conversion nor from any apostolic indoctrination after his conversion. The only remaining alternative is that *he was proclaiming the gospel which he had received, as he says, in and by his conversion experience itself* – ‘by revelation from Jesus Christ’ (Gal 1:12)! ...

Saul deduced from his conversion encounter with Jesus of Nazareth on the Damascus Road at least six new perceptions. ...⁶²

Upon examining the deductions that Reymond attributes to Paul's conversion experience, one cannot disagree that these truths were all related to the realization that Jesus was the Christ. However, Reymond ignores the clear testimony of Scripture when he attributes the development of Paul's gospel strictly to logical deduction from his own conversion experience. Paul speaks of multiple revelations of Jesus Christ rather than one. It was because of “the surpassing greatness of the revelations” which he saw that he was given the thorn in the flesh.⁶³ He “received from the Lord” the specific instructions regarding the Lord's Supper that he delivered to the church at Corinth.⁶⁴ He gives specific examples of Jesus directly communicating with him in his defense before the Jews.⁶⁵ In light of this Biblical record, Reymond's attempt to attribute Paul's message strictly to logical deduction rather than revelation fails. The simple truth is that however consistent Paul's gospel was with his conversion experience, he was not left to deduce the gospel from the Damascus-road appearance of Jesus.

⁶² Reymond, *Paul*, 69, 72, emphasis original.

⁶³ 2 Corinthians 12:1-7.

⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:23.

⁶⁵ Acts 22:17-21.

The implied conclusion to Reymond's presentation is one which fits in nicely with a Clarkian epistemology. Reymond's explanation of Paul's conversion experience and subsequent theology implies that logical extension can serve as a sufficient key to open the mysteries of the gospel. Vital to Reymond's case is the absence of further revelation in Paul's experience. In light of the record of such revelation, Reymond's attempt to find in Paul an exegetical illustration of his Clarkian epistemology fails.

Conclusion

Having seen some of the theological implications of a Clarkian epistemology, it remains to summarize our conclusions. Reymond, not content to "take all the factors of Scripture and bind them together into systematic relations with one another as far as we can," has insisted that the logical relationship between the facts of revelation be ascertainable on the human level.⁶⁶ On a practical level, this insistence places logic on at least an equal plane with revelation in determining truth. At the heart of Reymond's epistemology is a denial of the Creator/creature distinction in the realm of knowledge. Due to this error, Reymond, for all his good intentions, exhibits gross arrogance in his theological method, requiring that God answer to the creature's understanding of logic and rationality. Those who arrogantly belittle God in their conception of him will find the rebuke of God himself upon them:

These things you have done, and I have been silent;
 you thought that I was one like yourself.
 But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.⁶⁷

Not only have we found Reymond's methodology to be flawed in its basic principle, but

⁶⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) 166, quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 105.

⁶⁷ Psalm 50:21.

as we would expect, the theology that flows from this principle is wanting on the most basic issues. Reymond's commitment to pursuing logical relationship between facts before correspondence with revealed facts has resulted in theological positions which cannot be reconciled with Scripture. The erroneous conclusions considered in this paper have included a false understanding of the unity of the Trinity, a presumptive speculation regarding the order of the decrees of God, an understanding of election that severely limits the freedom of God's decrees, and a dangerous tendency to eisegesis in seeking exegetical ground for the Clarkian epistemology. These examples are certainly not exhaustive of the theological positions influenced by Reymond's faulty epistemological presuppositions. The range of their diversity should indicate something of the scope of Reymond's error. It is self-evident that these errors, being as they are fundamental aspects of theology, are of a serious and dangerous nature.

However serious the errors manifested in Reymond's theology, the true danger of the Clarkian epistemology is not appreciated until one realizes that where logical deductions are equated with truth, today's logical deductions must be included in the body of premises for future deductions. If a future generation holding to a Clarkian epistemology takes Reymond's theological assertions to be true, these errors will further distort theological conclusions wherever they are used as premises. The outcome of such an experiment would be a theology that progressively moves further and further from the base of revealed truth in Scripture until it ceases to be recognizable as Biblical religion.

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