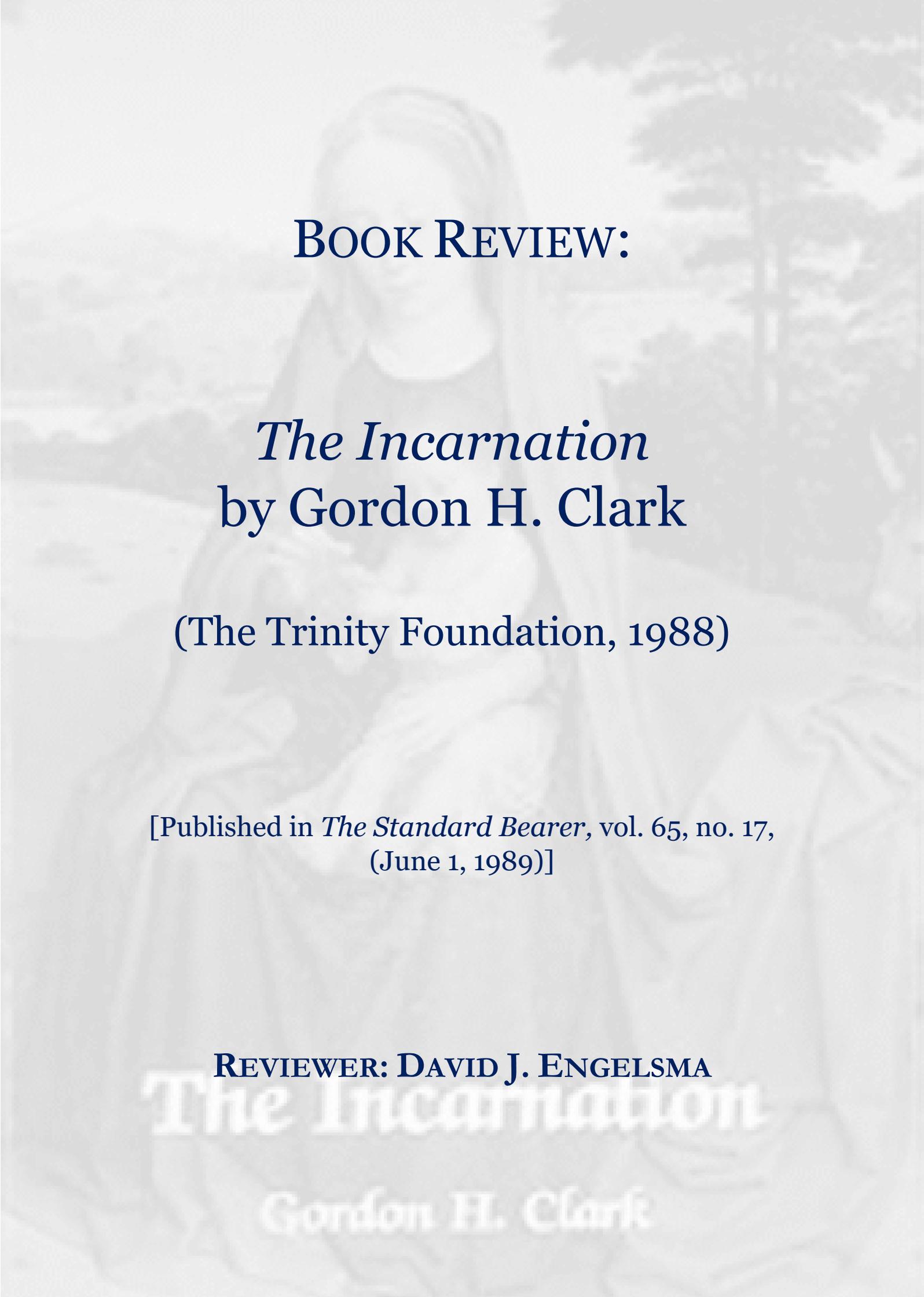


BRIEF ANALYSIS OF
THE VIEWS OF
GORDON H. CLARK
ON THE
INCARNATION AND
THE TRINITY

HERMAN HANKO & DAVID J ENGELSMA



BOOK REVIEW:

The Incarnation
by Gordon H. Clark

(The Trinity Foundation, 1988)

[Published in *The Standard Bearer*, vol. 65, no. 17,
(June 1, 1989)]

REVIEWER: DAVID J. ENGELSMA

The Incarnation

Gordon H. Clark

passed upon all men, in whom all sinned", the entire mass of our nature was ruined beyond doubt, and fell into the possession of its destroyer. p. 249.

This meant that Pelagius' doctrine of the power of that natural man's free-will was a fabrication. Augustine showed that, while man had indeed been created with the gift of free-will such that he could choose to do and did do the good, in the Fall he lost this, and consequently all men since then have been born without this. Augustine did not deny that man acted freely; but he proved from Scripture that truth concerning the will of men that Luther later set forth against Erasmus, namely, that the will of the natural man is bound to sin and sin only; it has no ability to will or do the good. Accordingly, Augustine stated in his work "On the Spirit and the Letter" (A.D. 412):

A man's free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall

begin to become known to him, unless he also takes delight in and feels love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. p. 85.

Having established the Scriptural teaching on the doctrine of sin, Augustine set the stage for the truth concerning the grace of God which alone restores the sinner and enables him to do what is pleasing to God. It was at this point that Augustine was most powerfully on the defensive and on the offensive. In treating the doctrine of God's sovereign grace he was above all concerned for the truth of God and the glory of His name. To deny the grace of God as the Pelagians did was for Augustine a most grievous offense. In one of his treatises he wrote:

For there are some persons who presume so much upon the free determination of the human will, as to suppose that it need not sin, and that we require no divine assistance Now how hurtful, and how pernicious and contrary to our salvation in Christ, and how violently adverse

to the religion itself in which we are instructed, and to the piety whereby we worship God "On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins". p. 44.

In another treatise Augustine was even more forceful:

For if natural capacity, by help of free will, is in itself sufficient both for discovering how one ought to live, and also for leading a holy life, then "Christ died in vain" Why also may I not myself exclaim? — nay, I will exclaim, and chide them with a Christian's sorrow, — "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by nature; ye are fallen from grace" "On Nature and Grace", p. 137.

God's sovereign grace — that was the theme defended and developed by Augustine in this controversy. This was his chief concern and reason for battling Pelagius and his followers. To him, only that faith which held to God's grace was the catholic Christian faith. Exactly what the "Doctor of grace" taught concerning this cardinal truth will have to wait until our next article. □

Book Reviews

THE INCARNATION, by Gordon H. Clark; The Trinity Foundation, 1988; 91 pp. plus appendixes; \$8.95 (Reviewed by the Editor)

This is a disturbing, and even distressing, book. Gordon H. Clark, renowned champion of Presbyterian orthodoxy, challenges the church's traditional and creedal doctrine of the incarnation, that Jesus is one person and that this person is the divine person of the eternal Son

of God. Clark argues that Jesus cannot be a real man like us unless He is a human person. Jesus, therefore, is both a divine person and a human person. John W. Robbins accurately expresses Clark's teaching in the concluding paragraph (written by Robbins because Clark died before completing the book), when he states:

Jesus Christ was and is both God and man, a divine person and a

human person. To deny either is to fall into error. (p. 78)

Clark is quite willing to criticize both the ecumenical and the Presbyterian creeds, which teach that Jesus has two natures in the unity of the one divine person. The manner of his criticism is cavalier. Having charged a "fatal flaw in the Chalcedonian Symbol," Clark tells us that "its bishop-authors did not explain, and probably did not themselves know the meanings

of 'rational soul,' 'consubstantial,' 'nature,' 'subsistence,' and above all 'person'" (p. 15). He treats the Westminster divines in similar fashion. Writing about the Westminster Confession's doctrine of God's infinity (Clark denies that God is infinite: "the Bible definitely says he is not," p. 60), Clark remarks that these "theologians . . . were not mathematicians and did not know what they were talking about" (p. 58). I am not so sure that the fathers at Chalcedon were such dummies regarding the person and natures of Christ, or that the divines of Westminster, mathematicians or not, were such ignoramuses concerning the infinity of the being of God. I am even less sure that the Spirit of Christ failed to lead the church into all the truth of the person and natures of Christ at Chalcedon, or into the truth of the infinity of the being of God at Dordt and Westminster.

A formidable logician, Clark nevertheless permits himself the logical fallacy of "poisoning the well" at the crucial point in his argument. As he is about to state his conclusion, that Jesus is a human person, Clark not only wards off the charge of Nestorianism (the heresy that Christ is two persons, condemned by the church at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 and rejected in the orthodox statement of the incarnation by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451), but also ascribes any such criticism of his, Clark's, doctrine to "unfriendly critics": "Some unfriendly critics will instantly brand the following defense of Christ's humanity as the heresy of Nestorianism" (p. 75). I am a friendly critic. But Clark's doctrine is the boldest, most advanced Nestorianism, suffering, fatally, from the weaknesses because of which the church rejected Nestorianism — its failure to unite the two

natures of the Savior and its inability to unify the work of redemption.

As though it clinches his argument that Christ is also a human person, Clark repeatedly raises the question, "Who suffered and died in the suffering and death of Jesus?" "On the cross Jesus said, 'I thirst.' No trinitarian Person could have said this because the Three Persons are pure incorporeal spirits . . . Who then, or what, thirsted on the cross?" (p. 73). "Let us then take it for granted that God cannot die. Now, if Christ be one divine person, no person was crucified and died. What then died on the cross?" (p. 69) Clark supposes that Chalcedonian orthodoxy has no answer to this question. Clark is mistaken. The answer is, "The person of the eternal Son of God suffered and died in the human nature." This is the wonder of the passion of Jesus Christ. This is also the reason why that suffering is of infinite worth and value, as the Canons of Dordt teach in II/3, 4. On the answer of Clark and Nestorius, that it was the human person of Jesus that suffered, the divine person was not involved, in which case the humanity of Jesus could never have endured the suffering of the infinite wrath of God. Also, even if the human person of Jesus did manage the suffering, that suffering does not have the worth that is necessary to satisfy the justice of God.

Clark also proposes his own, novel, and very peculiar definition of the term that is fundamental to trinitarian and incarnational doctrine, the term "person": *we shall define person as a composite of truths. A bit more exactly . . . the definition must be a composite of propositions (p. 54).* As three persons, God then is three composites of propositions. On this definition, it is not ob-

vious to me that a compound English sentence is not a person. Besides, since the word "composite" has as its basic meaning "made up of parts," Clark's definition seems to carry with it a challenge to the doctrine of the simplicity of God (the teaching that God's Being is not made up of parts).

Preachers and teachers in Reformed circles may well be reminded that the doctrine of the incarnation, like the related doctrine of the trinity, is being re-examined today, not only by the liberal left, but also by the conservative right. The point at which the traditional doctrine is being challenged is that of the full, real humanity of Jesus. This challenge calls for vigorous defense of the creedal doctrine of the church, as well as renewed study of the Scripture's teaching concerning the wonder of the Word's becoming flesh. □

REFORMING FUNDAMENTALISM: FULLER SEMINARY AND THE NEW EVANGELICALISM, by George M. Marsden (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 333 pp.; \$19.95, hardcover). Reviewed by the Editor.

This book is a fascinating history of Fuller Theological Seminary (in California) and at the same time of neo (new) - evangelicalism. As historian Marsden puts it, he uses "Fuller as a window through which to focus my study of recent evangelicalism and fundamentalism" (p. viii). Marsden traces the history of Fuller from its founding in 1947 by Charles E. Fuller (evangelist on "The Old Fashioned Revival Hour"), Harold J. Ockenga, Wilbur Smith, Carl Henry, Harold Lindsell, and others through its struggle in the 1960s over inerrancy (Fuller surrendered inerrancy) to its present status as a "mega-seminary." The

The
Trinity

BOOK REVIEW:

The Trinity
by Gordon H. Clark

(The Trinity Foundation, 1990)

[Published in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, (November, 1991)]

REVIEWER: HERMAN HANKO

the author on all points or not he will profit from a careful reading of this little book. ♦

The Trinity, by Gordon H. Clark; the Trinity Foundation, 1990; 175 pages, \$8.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman C. Hanko.]

This is the second edition of *The Trinity*, the first edition having been published in 1985. We are informed that this edition is "augmented by the addition of both topical and scriptural indexes."

This book is not easily read. Not only is the treatment of the doctrine in the course of this history of the church difficult to read, but Clark's own view of the trinity is difficult going. One had better be prepared to don his thinking cap before swimming in these waters.

A major section of the book (nearly 100 pages) is devoted to an historical survey of the truth of the Trinity. In this section various heresies and orthodox thinkers are treated. There are sections on Sabellianism, Athanasius, Augustine, the Athanasian Creed, Hodge, Berkhof, Bavinck, and VanTil. In connection with the latter, Clark accuses VanTil of denying the Trinity of persons within the Godhead. Although Clark quotes two short passages from VanTil's *Junior Systematics* which appear to support his allegation, this reviewer is not persuaded that his accusation is correct. Not only have I not found in VanTil's writings any denial of the truth of the

Trinity, but VanTil is at great pains to associate himself with the teachings of the church of the past.

However that may be, Clark himself is less than orthodox in his views of the Trinity. This becomes abundantly clear when he develops his own conceptions.

Perhaps most fundamental to Clark's errors is his definition of "Person." He defines "Person" as a collection of thoughts. He writes:

Accordingly the proposal is that a man is a congeries, a system, sometimes an agglomeration of miscellany, but at any rate a collection of thoughts. A man is what he thinks: and no two men are precisely the same combinations.

This is true of the Trinity also, for although each of the three Persons is omniscient, one thinks "I or my collection of thoughts is the Father," and the second thinks, "I or my collection of thoughts will assume or have assumed a human nature." The Father does not think this second thought, nor does the Son think the first. This is the qualitative theory of individuation, as opposed to the space-time theory....

Several romantically inclined students, and a few professors as well, have complained that "this makes your wife merely a set of propositions." Well, so it does. This suits me, for I am a set of propositions too....

Naturally, human beings are mutable: Their thoughts or minds change. The three Persons of the Godhead are immutable because their thoughts never change. They

never forget what they now know, they never learn something new, in fact they have never learned anything. Their thought is eternal. Since also the three Persons do not have precisely the same set of thoughts, they are not one Person, but three... (pp. 106, 107).

While it certainly is true that "Person" is a difficult concept to define (H. Hoeksema defined it as "An individual subsistence in a rational, moral nature"), Clark's definition of Person as a collection of thoughts will not do. A person is the *subject* of thinking and of thoughts, not the thoughts themselves. This basic idea of Clark is in agreement with what he wrote in his book on the incarnation of Christ when he discussed the Person and natures of our Lord.

In keeping with this strange and abstract definition of person, Clark also errs in his conception of the Personal attributes of the three Persons in God. "Thus the begetting of the Son occurs, and the Son as a Person exists, by a necessity of the divine nature — the nature of the divine will" (p. 112).

This heresy was taught very early in the history of the church by the Alexandrian heretic Origen. He too made the generation of the Son an act of the divine will, but Origen was clear enough in his thinking to recognize that this implied a certain subordination of the Son to the Father. This subordination of the Son to the Father paved the way for the heresy of Arius who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is, however,

difficult to see how, in Clark's thinking, a "collection of thoughts" can generate, by an act of the will (How can a "collection of thoughts" do any willing?), another "collection of thoughts."

This teaching of Clark that the generation of the Son is an act of the divine will is closely connected with another error. Clark makes all the works of God *ad extra* (i.e., works which God performs outside His own divine being) *necessary* works.

First of all, this is applied to God's counsel (pp. 111ff.). Clark argues that either we introduce time into God's trinitarian life to make God's counsel free (and so fall into the error of Arminianism), or we maintain that God is eternal, that His counsel is eternal, and that, therefore, His counsel is necessary. Here again Clark's intellectualism wins the day over the biblical givens. Scripture teaches both that God and His counsel are eternal, *and* that His counsel is the sovereignly free determination of His will. This may be difficult to understand; but God is the infinite One whose ways are past finding out. But there is no inherently logical contradiction between the two propositions: 1) God's counsel is eternal; 2) God's counsel is sovereignly free.

But because God's counsel is necessary, so also is creation and all of history necessary.

This is not "the best of all possible worlds," as Leibniz claimed: It is the only possible world, as Spinoza claimed....

Since God's mind is immutable, since his decree is eternal, it follows that no other world than this is possible or imaginable (pp. 118, 119).

But the inevitable consequence of this position is Pantheism. Apart now from the question of how a "collection of thoughts" can have a counsel or can create, if creation is necessary, it flows from the being of God Himself. This is Pantheism, and it is not strange that in the quote above, Clark speaks with approval of the Pantheist Spinoza.

There are many things in Gordon Clark which are soundly biblical; but the more I read of him, the more I become convinced that his thinking is dangerous and inimicable to the Reformed faith.

It takes a certain amount of intellectual arrogance to set one's

self up as an authority against the whole tradition of the Christian church and brush this tradition aside with a wave of the hand, then to promote ideas which are more philosophical than biblical. The latter is not an exaggeration. One looks in vain in Clark's book for references to Scripture when he is developing his own views.

Clark is not, however, only overly intellectual in his writings; he also writes in a very cavalier way which rubs me wrongly. He easily and cuttingly dismisses those who disagree with him as being intellectual pygmies, but he writes about the dearest and most precious truths of the Christian faith with an off-handedness and an all-but-joking fashion that is out of keeping with the great glory of God and the insignificance of puny man. ♦

Book Notices

Jonathan Edwards On Knowing Christ; Banner of Truth Trust, 1990; 276 pages, \$7.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman C. Hanko.]

Jonathan Edwards was undoubtedly one of the greatest and best-known preachers in the history of America. He worked as a pastor of the congregation in Northampton in the first half of the 18th century, during which time he participated in

the "Great Awakening" in New England. He was an ardent Calvinist standing in the Puritan tradition.

This volume contains ten of his sermons, some of which were preached during the revival in which he was active. His well-known sermon on Deuteronomy 32:35, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," is also included. This sermon has become so popular that it is even required-reading in many American

CORRESPONDENCE:

Letter and Response: Communication With Garrett P. Johnson

[Published in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2, (April, 1992)]

DAVID J. ENGELSMA AND HERMAN HANKO

Although a calling and although of the greatest importance for the present existence of the kingdom of Christ, marriage is not of ultimate importance. This is the final practical application of the basic truth about marriage that the apostle makes in I Corinthians 7. All must "sit loose to their marriage," so to speak: "They that have wives (must) be as though they had none" (v. 29). For the time has been shortened, the time both of the life of each married person and the time of history itself. The form of this world is passing away. The bond of marriage is lifelong, but only lifelong. God will surely loose the bond by the death of one of the married persons. And He will abolish the institution at the coming of Christ (cf. Matt. 22:30).

Does someone have a bad marriage? Let this encourage her. Is someone in danger of making an idol out of his marriage? Let this warn him. Does someone suffer because God withholds marriage from her? Let this comfort her.

The earthly symbol is quickly, finally, and utterly dissolved. Only the heavenly reality lasts forever: the bond of love and friendship, the covenant bond, the mystical union, that unites every believer with Jesus Christ.

Upon this, the Real Marriage, unmarried and married alike are to set their heart. ▲



Letter and Response

The letter which follows contains a reaction of Mr. Garrett P. Johnson to reviews of two books by Gordon H. Clark: *The Incarnation* and *The Trinity*. The first, by Prof. David Engelsma, appeared in the *Standard Bearer*; the second in the *Journal*.

December 7, 1991

Dear Professors Hanko and Engelsma,

I recently read your reviews of Gordon Clark's *The Trinity* and *The Incarnation* and I was dismayed by both. I believe that you have both misunderstood and misrepresented both Clark and VanTil. Your attack on Clark is a serious mistake on your part. I sincerely hope that my comments in this letter will clarify these issues and cause you to reconsider what you have written.

It seems to me that much of your misunderstanding comes from your unreasoned and kneejerk dislike and rejection of Clark's principle of individuation and the resulting definition of "person." Gentlemen, let me

ask you, What is your principle of individuation? Clark lays out three choices. Which do you prefer, or do you have another, never before thought of? What is your definition of a person? Please do not respond by appealing to the traditional formulas: subsistence, substance, etc. Clark has demonstrated that those terms are meaningless. It is time that you, as teachers of the church, engage the argument, rather than clinging to meaningless, though hoary terms.

As an example of how the argument is being carried forward, I am enclosing a new essay that will be appearing in the January/February issue of *The Trinity Review*. The author (Joel Parkinson), using Clark's definition of a person, demonstrates how God can be indivisibly one and three. This is real theological progress (and, I would hope that you are not opposed to progress). Reasserting undefined phrases that have been around for more than a millennium is not. You are simply failing to defend the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation against the onslaught of modern unbelief. As teachers, you ought to know better.

Contrary to what you say, Clark based his criticisms of VanTil on more than two brief references in one obscure source. Clark also quoted from the *Complaint* and *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Clark showed that VanTil was (1) putting forth a new view of the Trinity (VanTil's followers realize this), and (2) that this new view contradicts itself and the Bible. VanTil taught that God is, at the same time, both three persons and one person. This is unscriptural and absurd.

I am astonished that you say that you could not find in VanTil's writings "any denial of the truth of the Trinity." You gentlemen know quite well (or do you?) that there are two ways to deny a doctrine: One is saying that it is untrue; the other is by saying that yes, it is true, but so is this other doctrine true. Liberals deny the divinity of Christ in this manner by saying that yes, of course, Christ is divine, and so is everyone else. VanTil says yes, of course, God is three persons, and He is also one person. I suggest that you read J. Robbins' *Cornelius VanTil: The Man and the Myth* for a longer discussion. And, of course, you should consult Herman Hoeksema's invaluable editorials on the Clark-VanTil controversy.

You regard Clark's definition of a person as his "most fundamental" error. Why? What is wrong with it? What is your definition? Why do you make false criticisms devoid of biblical alternatives? Clark quotes SCRIPTURE to support his view. Among other things, he wrote an entire book (*The Johannine Logos*) to deny the neo-orthodox dichotomy between propositions and persons. Of course, the neo-orthodox were not the first to make this false separation, but they have been the most consistent. That is how they came up with their theology of encounter. (Incidentally, one time I confronted a liberal, [encounter-type] Presbyterian minister and proposed Clark's

theory of individuation. He immediately exploded in great anger and accused Clark of speculative nonsense. When I asked for his definition of a person, he rudely walked away in a tantrum.)

Gentlemen, there is no middle ground between Clark's definition of persons as thinking propositions (Christ said: "I am the Truth") and neo-orthodox irrationalism. The past millennium of confusion on this point has been eliminated as the theological argument has progressed. You accuse Clark of using "strange and abstract" definitions, but nothing could be more strange and abstract than defining a person as a "subsistence" or a "substance." Clark's definition, far from being strange or abstract, is derived from Scripture. "Subsistence" and "substance" are not. As teachers in the church, you are divinely commanded to teach what the Scriptures teach, not what Aristotle or Boethius taught.

You assert that "it is difficult to see how ... a collection of thoughts can generate, by an act of will, another collection of thoughts." I don't think it is difficult at all. You seem to think that thoughts are dead, lifeless things. But Scripture does not. Christ said His words, His doctrine, His thoughts, are life, did He not? When we call God the "living" God, we do not ascribe biological life to Him. We mean that He is a thinking and speaking God. God is His mind, and that mind, those thoughts, express themselves. What else is there? If you think God is something else than His thoughts, prove to me from Scripture just what He might be. Nevertheless, the doctrine that God is His mind is the major difference between God and idols, according to Scripture. God creates by speaking thoughts; He upholds the universe by thinking (in contrast to natural laws), He reveals truth by speaking thoughts. Are these also "difficult to see"? God, who is truth, a collection of propositions (i.e., scriptural and infinite) created human and angelic persons.

You seem to be confused by the words "necessary" and "free." Whatever God does is from the sense that nothing external to Him controls Him. We are not free, for God controls us. Whatever God does is both necessary and voluntary, because His works are acts of His will (i.e., voluntary) and He is immutable (i.e., necessary). If God's decree is eternal, then He had to create, not because something outside of Him was forcing Him to, but because He is immutable. If you keep the definitions of "free" and "necessary" clearly in mind, there is no problem understanding why Clark says that God's works are necessary. To suggest (as you seem to imply on pp. 57-58) that they are not necessary is to suggest that God is neither immutable nor eternal.

When you say that "This may be difficult to understand; but God is the infinite One whose ways are past finding out," you are imagining a contradiction that is not there. And since God has revealed this matter to us, it is not "past finding out." I am sorry that you are seminary teachers and have

not understood these things. I am a humble layman, and by trade a professional musician. Joel Parkinson is an engineer by trade. When musicians and engineers are forced to correct the teachers of the church, the church is truly in a sad state of affairs.

Fortunately, past teachers of the church were not as confused as they are today. Consider this passage from John Gill's *The Cause of God and Truth*: "God is a most free agent, and liberty in Him is in its utmost perfection, and yet does not lie in indifference to good and evil; He cannot commit iniquity, He cannot lie, or deny Himself; His will is determined only to that which is good; He can do no other; He is the author of all good, and of that only; and what He does He does freely, and yet necessarily...." Perhaps you would like to retract your statements about necessity, once you have thought about them.

Then you make another mistake: "If creation is necessary, it flows from the being of God Himself." Please furnish the argument justifying this conclusion. (Are you implying that if creation is free, it does not flow from the being of God Himself? Or are you using "creation" to mean something else? Does it mean "universe" or "the act of creating"?)

Then you make another mistake: "This is Pantheism." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "pantheism" as "the religious belief or philosophical theory that God and the universe are identical (implying a denial of the personality and transcendence of God); the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God." Obviously, necessary creation is not pantheism.

Then you compound your mistakes by making a vicious insinuation about Clark: "It is not strange that ... Clark speaks with approval of the pantheist Spinoza." As I recall, Paul also quotes a pantheist philosopher in Acts, under the direction of the HOLY SPIRIT: In him we live and move and have our being. Dare you insinuate that Paul is also a pantheist? If not, then you ought to apologize to Clark, and to your readers. I demand such an apology and retraction in the next issue of your magazine.

If you were even faintly aware of Clark's writings you would have known his rejection of Spinoza's pantheism. Try reading *A Christian View of Men and Things* and *Thales to Dewey* for starters. As teachers of the church, it is inexcusable for you to be saying and writing these things.

You accuse Clark of rarely using Scripture in developing his own views of the Trinity. In 139 pages he cites 104 passages of Scripture. In your misleading review, you do not cite one reference supporting your views.

You conclude your review by writing that Clark's "thinking is dangerous and inimicable to the Reformed faith." Hardly. What is dangerous and inimicable to the faith is the unwillingness to think that you have shown in your review, the unwillingness to engage the contemporary

opponents of Christianity, and the eagerness to repeat undefined and misleading formulations that have not been clarified in centuries.

You say that “it takes a certain amount of intellectual arrogance to set one’s self up as an authority against the whole tradition of the Christian church and brush this tradition aside with the wave of the hand, then to promote ideas which are more philosophical than biblical.” First, Clark does not set himself up as an authority; his authority is Scripture. Second, you yourself admitted that his historical discussion of the Trinity goes on for 100 pages; this is hardly a “wave of the hand.” Third, it is you, using terms like “subsistence” and “substance,” who are more philosophical than biblical. Fourth, Clark does not challenge the “whole tradition of the Christian church” but the erroneous parts of that tradition. Or are you saying that church tradition is infallible?

Finally, you accuse Clark of being “overly intellectual,” which is a bit like accusing a man of being overly virtuous. Then you end the review with a litany of unfounded and scurrilous charges about Clark being “cavalier,” “cutting,” “off-handed,” and “all-but-joking.” You cite no quotations; you give no examples. It seems to me that it is you who are being cavalier and cutting, though not overly intellectual.

Now, as for the review of *The Incarnation*, let me rehearse the impasse to which the traditional view has brought us: If Christ was not a human person, no one died, no one suffered on the cross, no one was raised from the dead, no one thirsted, no one grew in wisdom or stature, no one hungered, no one prayed not my will but thine be done, no one was tempted, and no one was ignorant. Clark prefers to stick with Scripture which repeatedly refers to “the man Christ Jesus” and says that Jesus did all these things.

It is a mistake to say that the second Person of the Trinity died in His human nature, not only because the second Person of the Trinity cannot die, but because you have not told us what a nature is. Do you mean that Christ has a human will? That He has a human intellect? If your answer to these questions is yes, then what was Christ lacking to be a human person? Please do not hide behind the skirts of Chalcedon; the theological debate has moved much further in the past 1,500 years. And no, to answer your question directly, I do not think that the Holy Spirit led either Chalcedon or Westminster into all truth, because councils and men may err and have erred.

Finally, back to “persons.” You write: “As three persons, God then is three composites of propositions. On this definition it is not obvious to me that a compound English sentence is not a person.” Your mistake is elementary: All persons are propositions does not imply that all propositions are persons. All dogs have four feet does not imply that all animals with four feet are dogs.

As for God’s simplicity, you really are grasping at straws in your

attempts to denigrate Clark: God is simple with the simplicity of one system. God is truth, and truth is a system. But within that system, there are many truths. Many of them are revealed to us in the Bible. That is how the one and the many exist in God: The many truths form one system.

Finally, you end the review oddly (although you may simply intend to smear Clark again) by saying that “the point at which the traditional doctrine [of the Incarnation] is being challenged [today] is that of the ‘full, real humanity of Jesus.’” I have yet to meet a full, real human who is not a person. In fact, there is no such thing.

Cordially,
Garrett P. Johnson

There are several reasons why it is difficult to deal with Garrett P. Johnson’s letter. The first is that he deals with two separate articles by two different men in one letter, and one cannot always be sure with whom he disagrees. The second is that one of the book reviews to which Mr. Johnson refers, written by Prof. David Engelsma, appeared in the *Standard Bearer* (in which periodical both Mr. Johnson’s letter and Prof. Engelsma’s response rightly ought to appear), while the other book review, written by myself, appeared in the last issue of the *Journal*. We have solved these difficulties by printing Mr. Johnson’s letter in this issue of the *Journal* and by arranging the answer in such a way that Prof. Engelsma and I have each answered that part which seems to refer to our own reviews.

The third reason why it is difficult to answer Mr. Johnson’s letter is that Mr. Johnson repudiates the historic creeds of the church. Specifically he repudiates the Creed of Chalcedon and the Westminster Confessions with respect to their teachings on the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is serious business, because one who repudiates the creeds of the church on this central question puts himself outside the church which confesses this truth. Mr. Johnson sets himself outside of all Presbyterian Churches by his repudiation of Westminster on the point in question; presumably he sets himself outside the Reformed Churches by a similar repudiation of what the Belgic Confession teaches (identical with Westminster); but he also sets himself outside Christendom when he repudiates Chalcedon, which, along with Nicea, defines the entire Christian tradition.

Now Mr. Johnson may do this if he wishes; but he himself will have to admit that such action makes fruitful discussion all but impossible, for it is all but impossible for one who stands firmly within this entire tradition of the church (beginning with Nicea, leading through Chalcedon and the *Symbolum Quicunque*, embracing the whole of the Reformation, and coming to us through all the Presbyterian and Reformed creeds) to talk

fruitfully with one who separates himself from it on such a crucial question of faith.

Mr. Johnson may perhaps argue (as he does) that “councils and men may err, and have erred”; but to any thinking Christian two thoughts immediately come to mind. The first is that the whole church since Chalcedon and the whole Protestant church since the Reformation have unanimously confessed the truth to which Mr. Johnson takes exception. The whole church has confessed this truth, not out of careless commitment and thoughtless acceptance of an ancient belief, but out of a conviction that this truth is biblical; that it is forged in the fire of controversy; and that, after continual re-examination in the light of God’s Word, under the pressures of attacks made against it, it remains firmly imbedded in the faith of the people of God. Enemies have marshalled against it every argument known to man, for it is rightly the cornerstone of the Christian faith. It has withstood every attack. It is no little matter to set oneself over against all the church of the entire new dispensation and over against theological giants whose abilities put ours to shame and whose devotion to the cause of the truth of the gospel has so far outstripped ours that one is embarrassed to make a comparison.

Mr. Johnson makes a plea for development of the truth. The plea is well made. But development of the truth has never and does not now take place by a repudiation of what has been the confession of the church throughout her history. If in the work of developing the riches of the truth in Christ Jesus, one is always obligated to “start from scratch” as it were, the task would not only be impossible, but it would lose all its attractiveness and luster. Christ promised to His church the Spirit of truth to lead the church into all truth. That promise has been fulfilled from the day of Pentecost to today. The church, after comparing the creeds with Scripture and finding them sound, receives these creeds as the fruit of the Spirit of truth. Joyfully and thankfully she takes them as a gift of grace given to the church from the Spirit.

That is her incentive to develop these truths. The truth has always and now still develops as a flower unfolds from a bud to a glorious blossom; as a mighty oak develops from an acorn. It does not develop by spurning what the church in the past has confessed.

But let us grant that the church for 1,500 years has been wrong in her confession of the truth concerning Christ and that the church today, through her creeds, confesses false doctrine. Any man who loves the church of Christ does not merely repudiate openly and publicly what the church has always confessed, but makes it his business to go the proper ecclesiastical way to demonstrate to the church that her confession is wrong and that, for the sake of her own salvation, she ought to correct it and bring it into harmony with the Scriptures. He has the moral responsibility before God and before the

church to do this. But this goal is not accomplished by publicly taking positions contrary to the heritage of the church, and then writing biting letters against those who seek to uphold that glorious heritage which has served the church so well for a millennium and a half.

* * * * *

What follows is Prof. Engelsma's response.

Let it be clearly understood, I do indeed (to use Mr. Johnson's pejorative language) "hide behind the skirts of Chalcedon." To say it rightly, I confess what the Spirit of Christ led the church to confess at Chalcedon: Jesus Christ is one divine person — the person of the eternal Son of God — in two natures — human and divine. I reject as heresy what the Spirit led the church to reject at Chalcedon: the error that Jesus is two persons (Nestorianism) and the error that Jesus is a mingling of deity and humanity (Eutychianism).

I "hide behind the skirts of Chalcedon" because I am a Reformed believer and an officebearer in a Reformed denomination. Reformed believers are bound in their theological thinking by the Reformed creeds. Reformed officebearers promise at their ordination to be faithful to the Reformed creeds.

The Reformed creeds teach about the person and natures of Christ exactly what the Christian church taught in the Symbol of Chalcedon. The Belgic Confession teaches that

by this conception, the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; so that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person: yet, that each nature retains its own distinct properties (Art. 19).

The Westminster Confession teaches the same:

The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fulness of time was come, take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man (8.2).

The teaching that Jesus is two persons as well as two natures is heresy — the Nestorian heresy.

What Jesus lacks to be a human person is not a human intellect or a human will, which belong to the human *nature*, but a human subsistence in His rational, moral nature, or, to put it differently, a human self-conscious subject of all his thinking, willing, and doing. The “I” in Jesus, as in “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), is the subsistence, or self-conscious subject, of the second person of the Trinity.

This brings up Dr. Clark’s novel definition of person as a “composite of propositions.” The definition is a startling contradiction of the thinking of Christ’s church for the past two thousand years. It is an arid reduction of the rich revelation in Scripture of the person of the Savior and of the persons of the Godhead to an abstract concept. Can a “composite of propositions” love me and give itself for me? Can a “composite of propositions” dwell in me and comfort me? Can I pray to “composites of propositions”? Would I care to?

Clark’s definition of person is also absurd. I repeat, Johnson’s charge of an elementary error in my logic notwithstanding, on Clark’s definition of person as a composite of propositions a compound English sentence is a person. So is a book. Clark *defines* person. A definition gives the essence of a thing and distinguishes the thing from other things. If I defined a human being as that which stands on two legs, men would have every right to reject my definition on the ground that it included two-legged tables as persons. They could also reject my definition on the ground that it excluded babies as persons, since they do not stand on two legs.

This raises another question about Clark’s definition of a person. Is a newborn baby a person? Is an unborn baby a person? A severely retarded human?

Mr. Johnson is mistaken to say that the church is in sad shape when humble laymen must correct the teachers of the church. When this really takes place, the church is in good shape. The teachers probably are in sad shape, but the church is healthy that has such capable laymen.

The church is in sad shape, however, when laymen and theologians take it upon themselves harshly to criticize and violently to repudiate the fundamental doctrines of the church as laid down by the Spirit of truth in the confessions of the church.

* * * * *

What follows is Prof. Hanko’s response.

We ought, I think, to have a brief lesson in church history.

The brilliant but erratic and speculative heretic Origen was the first

theologian in the church to teach clearly the eternal generation of the Son by the Father. This was a significant and important step forward in the church's understanding of the doctrine of the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The difficulty was, however, that Origen taught that the generation of the Son by the Father was an act *of God's will*. This was not only a serious flaw in Origen's position, but it caused a great deal of grief and confusion in the church. The orthodox were often wont to appeal to Origen in support of their contention that the relation between the First and Second persons of the Trinity was a relation of generation. They did this with considerable justification.

The trouble was that the arch-heretic Arius, intent on denying the divinity of Christ, also appealed to Origen in support of his heresy, and pointed out that the act of the generation of the Son by the Father was an act of God's will. Because generation was an act of God's will, Christ was less than divine. He was not "very God of very God," to quote Nicea. Further, because generation was an act of the will, the Second person of the Trinity was subordinate to the First person. Christ was lower than God.

The relationships between the three persons in the holy Trinity are *necessary* relationships, for they involve the very essence of the triune God. These relationships are not free, nor a part of God's will. Generation and spiration are so of God's essence that God is not God without them. If God's will were involved in these relationships, then the First person has a will of His own according to which He wills the generation of the Second person and the spiration of the Third person; the Second person has a will of His own according to which He wills to be generated and to spirate the Third person; the Third person has a will of His own according to which He wills to proceed from the Father and Son. Thus God would have three wills, which is the same as saying that there are three Gods.

God's counsel is free. It is not necessary in any sense of the word. It is not necessary in the sense that it belongs to the essence and being of God. It is not necessary in the sense that anything within God Himself or outside of God could and did compel Him to formulate His counsel or to include in it such things as He did. It is not necessary because the eternal God *willed* a counsel from all eternity, and the choice of His will is a sovereignly free choice. It is not necessary in the sense that God needed His counsel to attain His glory and enrich His own essence. Sovereignly and freely, as an act of His will, He determined His counsel. His counsel is His own eternal will and eternal thought. The triune God with one will and one mind wills His counsel. It is His will which makes His counsel free.

Having willed His counsel, what God willed shall also surely come to pass. His free and sovereign counsel makes all His works in time "necessary" from the viewpoint of the counsel, but emphatically free from the viewpoint

of God Himself. When God determines His counsel, He determines to realize it in time and history as well. But because the counsel is free and because history is the realization of God's counsel, all that God does is free. God has no need of His creation; He freely forms all things. God has no need to save sinners; He freely does so through the gift of Jesus Christ. God has no need to save me by the power of His grace; He freely determines to do so — a wonder for which eternity will be insufficiently long to praise His blessed name.

God is both immutable and eternal. The immutable and eternal God freely determines His counsel eternally. He freely determines to execute that counsel for the glory of His own name.

To make the counsel and creation necessary is to deny that the counsel and creation are acts of God's will. It is to maintain, therefore, that God had no choice in the matter of forming His counsel and creating the world. It is to maintain that God's counsel and creation are of the very essence and nature of God — in the same sense in which generation belongs to God's nature and is necessary. This is Pantheism. Pantheism teaches that God's counsel and creation are but an overflowing of the divine essence, necessary and inevitable. To make creation necessary is to be a Pantheist.

God's work of creation is that act of God's will by which He freely and sovereignly gave existence to the creation which He had determined in His counsel to form. God gave such existence to that creation by giving it existence which was distinct from His own divine being, but which was nevertheless totally dependent upon Him. This is the biblical and creedal doctrine of creation.

And this has been and is now the faith of the church. ▲

Book Reviews

Dominion & Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress, by Gary North. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987. Paper. \$8.95. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

As a postmillennialist who finds in Revelation 20:7ff. the prophecy that history ends with a Satanic assault upon the church, Gary North

has a problem. How can the breakup of the victorious postmillennial kingdom of Christ be explained? And where do these ungodly hordes, "the number of whom is as the sand of the sea," come from? The worldwide revolt against the Lord Christ at the end would seem to be a powerful proof for amillennial eschatology.

Not so, says North. There is an explanation that accounts for both a

