

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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## What Is Truth?

by Gordon H. Clark

*Editor's Note: "What Is Truth?" was first published in the Fall 1980 issue of Covenant Theological Seminary's journal Presbiterion. It was first published by The Trinity Foundation in the second (1987) and subsequent editions of God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics.*

*The Reformed Journal* of May 1980 (pages 27ff) carries James Daane's review of Carl F. H. Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority*. Its rejection of Henry's views circles around certain theses, allegedly held by Gordon H. Clark, and adopted or adapted by Henry. Surfacing once or twice in the review, but underlying the whole, is the conflict between the Henry-Clark defense of Biblical inerrancy and the Daane-Fuller assertions that what the Bible teaches is sometimes false. Unless this conflict is clearly understood, Daane's review will easily be misinterpreted.

The title of the review is well-chosen: "What is Truth?" No other three words could better express the question at issue. Henry and Clark rather definitely say what they mean by truth, or at least they define the form of truth. Daane clearly rejects their view. The conclusion of this rejoinder will be that Daane – while he intends to defend a radically different form of truth – nowhere describes the form of truth he defends, nor does he even outline a supporting epistemology.

### Epistemology

Daane's attack on Henry begins very plausibly: "In theology as in any science, what is to be known dictates the terms by which it can be known." Though plausible, Kant denied it. But let us assume that it is merely ambiguous, or at least incomplete. Physicists (for Daane mentions science) have often thought they knew an object, when their method of knowing – the limitations of which they did not recognize – gave them an entirely different object. Because of such complexities, and even simpler ones, Daane's application of his principle to Henry's method carries no weight. Daane inferred that therefore, Henry – instead of beginning with epistemology – should have written his theology first and his epistemology last. On the contrary, in any subject – physics or theology – not only may the method be explained first, but it is best to do so. Suppose a physicist says that space is curved, or a botanist says that an ocotilla is not a cactus. The inquiring student will ask, How do you know? The student or critical colleague will wish to know whether the method used could possibly arrive at the conclusion stated. Physicists used to say that light consisted of ether waves. Today it is generally agreed that the methods used were defective, and that light is something else (they don't quite know what). Hence even if botany or theology is written first, it cannot be accepted by a scholar until the crucial question is answered: How do you know? In a systematic treatment, the methodology ought to come first. Instead of asking, What is a cactus? or What is light? someone asks, What is God? How

can one go about answering that question? Do we consult the Koran or the Vedas? Do we study the stars? Do we send a questionnaire to a thousand college professors? A method must be chosen (or used unwittingly) before any answer is forthcoming. Henry's method is to consult the Bible and from it deduce that God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable. We cannot start with God; we must start with the Bible. Why not say so first and then proceed to the theology the Bible teaches.

Daane's confusion at this point is considerable. The premise of his inference is, "If to understand God we must stand under, and submit to the terms by which he can be known." The reader stumbles at this premise even before he arrives at the conclusion. How can one stand under or voluntarily submit to terms before he knows what the terms are? Daane completely ignores the problem of discovering the terms. To use his crude literalism, a decision to stand under certain terms rather than others raises the problem of how to select the terms. As Daane so well insists, "This is no mere methodological quibble"; had Daane rather than Henry "complied with this requirement, he might not have given us what is in my judgment a quite [confused non-]evangelical theology and apologetic." To state the point more clearly, Daane's confused premise cannot convince us of the truth of his conclusion.

### **Ideas and Propositions**

However, the basic and determinative disagreement between Daane and the Henry-Clark view is the nature or form of truth. To quote (page 27, column 3, bottom): "For Henry as for Gordon Clark the nature of truth is that of an idea."

Here a parenthetical clarification is necessary. The term idea is too vague and in the Platonic sense incorrect. In *Thales to Dewey* Clark argued against Hegel's view, and by implication against Plato's, that reality consists of concepts or Ideas. Daane is indeed right that this is not a mere methodological quibble. It is no quibble: It is nonetheless methodological, and it distinguishes Plato and Hegel from Augustine and any others who rely on propositions or truths. So much for the parenthesis; let us now return to the previous paragraph.

For Henry as for Gordon Clark the nature of truth is that of an idea. Biblical truth is what God thinks.... This ideational content of the divine mind...became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. For Henry this means that Jesus disclosed or revealed truth, but not that he is himself the truth.

Presumably this is not a true statement of Henry's position, and it is certainly false in Clark's case. The last few paragraphs of the present article will explain in greater detail why it is false. And if, besides, Daane's statement was intended as a conclusion of an inference, the inference is invalid.

Daane's next sentence is also false, unless it is unintelligibly ambiguous. The sentence is, "The fact that this Logos *became* flesh does not mean that this becoming is itself an essential ingredient of truth." Since Henry and Clark accept the Bible as infallible truth, and since the Bible says "The Word became flesh," we both accept the statement as an essential "ingredient" of the truth – that is, as a particular and essential truth in the complete system of truth.

The underlying point of contention is the nature of truth. Although Daane quotes correctly, he does not seem to understand the implications of Henry's and Clark's words. On page 28 at the top of column one Daane writes, "Henry agrees with Gordon Clark that only propositions are the object of knowledge. 'Only propositions have the quality of truth,' he says, explaining further that 'the only significant view of revelation is rational-verbal revelation' (430). He quotes with approval what Clark says: 'The word *truth* can only be used metaphorically or incorrectly when applied to anything other than a proposition.'"

In *Thales to Dewey* (455) Clark, after some pages of technical detail, arrives at the subhead "Propositions and Concepts." But the simplest reason why truth must be propositional is that a noun all by itself can be neither true nor false. Suppose someone says, without any implicit context, "Two," or "Cat," or "Star." No one could understand; neither truth nor falsity has been spoken. Only when a predicate is attached to a subject by a copula can the expression be true or false. "Two is an even number" is true; "Two is an odd number" is false; but just plain "Two" is unintelligible. Therefore, Clark insists that when a

botanist says, “A cactus has no true leaves,” he uses the word *true* in a metaphorical sense, contrasting the spines of a cactus with the ordinary leaves of an ocotilla or rose bush. What the metaphor means, a good botanist can explain in literally intended propositions.

That anyone should take umbrage at a metaphorical use of the word *truth* is rather strange because both the Bible and our ordinary everyday language contain frequent metaphors. Yet when Daane’s next sentence says, “What then of Jesus’ claim, ‘I am the truth,’” he seems to mean that this could not possibly be metaphorical. But does not Jesus’ sentence also contain the phrase, “I am the way”? Surely *way* is metaphorical, for Jesus was not a dusty road strewn with stones. If, then, *way* must be metaphorical, why is it impossible that *truth* be so too? Yet, by way of anticipation, *truth* in this instance may be literal in a sense Daane has overlooked.

To proceed and develop this sense and to compare Daane’s sentences with Scripture, note first that he says, “The truth of the [Biblical] propositions is not that the proposition is, say, the resurrection and the life.... Not to acknowledge this is on the one hand to deny that Jesus is the truth, and on the other to reduce truth to language, to verbal propositions, to thought that can be written.” Here Daane both contradicts Scripture and falls into systematic confusion. Scripture says, “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (*John* 6:63). This verse is all the more conclusive because John’s or Jesus’ word for *words* is *rhemata*, not *logous*. The latter could have been interpreted in some metaphysical sense, such as is found in Philo or Heraclitus; whereas *rhemata* carries the more literal connotation of words, exemplified by *two*, *cat*, or *star*—that is, as sounds in the air or ink spots on paper. Not that Jesus actually meant ink marks on paper, but that Daane’s insistence on literalism is more embarrassed by *rhemata* than it would have been by *logous*. Obviously, Henry and Clark do not “reduce” truth to language, especially not to sounds in the air and ink marks on paper. (See Clark’s quotation from Abraham Kuyper in *Language and Theology*.) Before truths or thoughts can be “written,” that is, symbolized on paper, the thoughts must be thought. Different literal words can express

the same thought. For example, “*Das Mädchen ist schön*,” “*La jeune fille est belle*,” and “The girl is beautiful,” are three different sentences with all different words, but they are the same, single, identical proposition. Daane’s argument seems to be based on inattention to the distinction between thoughts and their symbolic surrogates.

## **The Bible**

With this misunderstanding of the Henry-Clark position Daane can say,

Henry’s view...reduces the supreme, final, personal form of the Word of God, namely Jesus Christ, to the same level as the Bible. Such a Bible is not a witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is the ultimate and final form of the Word of God to man, but is *itself* the ultimate form and true nature of the Word of God. Such a view of the Bible is the source of the insistence that the original Bible must be absolutely inerrant. If the Bible as propositional is a higher form of truth than Jesus, then the sinlessness of Jesus is less important than the inerrancy of the Bible. (28)

This important paragraph elicits four observations. First, Daane’s argument depends on and seems to be initiated by a denial of Biblical inerrancy. Second, it contains one or two unfortunate confusions. Third, one of its inferences is a logical fallacy. Fourth, Daane nowhere explains the so-called personal form of truth, which he opposes to the Henry-Clark view.

First, like the Auburn Affirmationists of 1924, Fuller Seminary professors Jack Rogers and David Hubbard – with the cooperation of World Vision’s Paul Rees and Berkeley Mickelsen of Bethel Seminary in their book *Biblical Authority*, and Dewey Beegle of Wesley Seminary in *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, plus Jack Rogers again in a criticism of Carl Henry – and now James Daane formerly of Fuller Seminary, have vigorously attacked the truthfulness of the Bible. This current cooperative effort – for the several contributors to *Biblical Authority* were certainly cooperating, even if Beegle and Daane acted independently – is noteworthy because nothing like it has occurred since the Auburn Affirmation. In those days J.

Gresham Machen found few to support him in his defense of Scripture, the virgin birth, the miracles, the atonement, and the resurrection. Today, in defense of the truthfulness of the Bible, there stand about a thousand members of the Evangelical Theological Society, a recently formed committee in which James Boice of Philadelphia is prominent, and a few individual authors such as Carl Henry and Harold Lindsell. In evaluating Daane's article on "What is Truth?" one must keep this larger scene in view.

Second, there is some lack of clarity when Daane speaks of different forms and levels of truth. At least five times on page 28 he uses the term "form." These five instances may differ slightly in their connotations, but in two the phrase is "a higher form of truth," and in one "a lesser form of truth." Since propositional truth has the form of subject-copula-predicate, which Daane considers the lesser form, his higher form must be devoid of subjects, copulas, and predicates. The difficulty with a truth that has no subject becomes a major consideration in point five below. If Daane had said, a higher truth and a lesser truth, instead of a higher and lesser form, and if by these phrases he had meant that one truth may be logically subordinate to another truth, and Euclid's tenth theorem is subordinate to his fifth and to his axioms, there would have been no confusion. No matter how subordinate a theorem may be to another, they not only have the same form, but they are also equally true. Hence when Daane accuses Henry of implying that "the Bible as propositional is a higher form of truth than Jesus," a reader stumbles at the confusion, for Daane never explains what this strange form is.

In the third place this confusion, not unexpectedly, leads Daane into a fallacious inference. If the Bible is a higher form of truth, he says in effect, then the sinlessness of Jesus is less important than inerrancy. How Daane gets from his premise to his conclusion is by no means evident. Nor is the meaning of his word "important." Whether a statement is more important than another depends on its particular application. A principle of engineering is more important for an engineering problem than a principle of organic chemistry, but the latter may be more important for cancer research. In any case, the only method by which we

could learn that Jesus was sinless is the method of Biblical revelation. Neither Josephus, nor Tacitus, nor some "personal truth" tells us that Jesus was sinless. And if the Bible contains errors here and there, as those who deny inerrancy hold, we cannot trust the Bible's assertions of Jesus' sinlessness, for these could be some of its errors. If those who reject inerrancy claim that these verses are not errors, we ask, How do you know? By what epistemological criterion do you distinguish between the Bible's truths and the Bible's mistakes? For if the Bible makes false assertions, there must be a criterion independent of and superior to the Bible by which its assertions must be judged. We challenge our opponents to state their epistemological criterion. Unless we know their method first, we cannot accept their theology.

The four points indicated above are all closely related. Points two and three, confusions and fallacies, are together exemplified at the top of column two, page 28: "This reductionism is the consequence of a theological method which *first* decides the nature of our knowledge of God and then decides that God must be of such nature to be knowable by us." The idea here, a confusion and an invalid inference condensed in the term "reductionism," seems to be that the Clark-Henry method requires one to determine first, apart from any revelation, the nature of knowledge and then, again apart from revelation, to conclude that the nature of God must conform to it. Not at all; the actuality is completely different. One of the frequent criticisms against Clark, even by those who accept inerrancy, is that he restricts the scope of knowledge by limiting it to what "is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (*Westminster Confession*, I.vi). Did Daane fail to notice this rather prominent thesis? At any rate, when a man begins to read the Bible, he finds that it contains many propositions – propositions about the stars, about Abraham, the Levitical law, the conquest of Canaan. He cannot go far, however, without learning something about God and man. He learns that God is a rational Spirit, a God of truth, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He learns that man – in contrast with the animals – is a rational creature, that man sinned,

and that God has provided a method of atonement.

But to return to the main subject: What one learns first from the Bible and what he learns second and third varies from man to man. One person begins with *Genesis*; another begins with *Matthew*. Similarly, a man may learn several propositions about God without reflecting on the method by which he learned them. Musicians and painters usually produce good works of art before they understand the theory. Hence in temporal psychology a knowledge of God precedes a knowledge of method. But to explain this process an apologist ought to start with the methodology. For while the unreflective reader may be unaware of the methodology – he may not realize how he does what he does – he nonetheless uses the method. And for Clark and Henry the method is Scriptural.

Suppose a reflective and intelligent person begins with *Matthew*. He comes across the words *genealogy, Abraham, begat, fourteen*, and so on. He will then perceive that every sentence, indeed every word, in the Bible depends on the logical law of contradiction for its intelligibility. Without this law every word would have an infinite number of meanings: *David* would not only mean Moses and Judas, it would also mean sling, stone, atom, and typewriter. And *God* would mean devil. Apart from logic, a noun would mean what it does not mean; and if a word means everything, it means nothing. In order to mean something, a word must also not mean something. There is no meaning without the law of contradiction. Hence, in acquiring the knowledge that God is knowable, God's rational creature – so far as he can escape the misunderstandings and fallacies of the noetic effects of sin – must use the laws of logic. Dr. Daane should try to answer the question, How can we know that God is knowable, or that he is omniscient, without using the rational laws of logic? If we did not (first) use the laws of logic, how could we know anything about God? And *first* is the wrong word, for knowing God and using logic are the same identical act.

We now come to point four where the unintelligibility of Daane's criticism is most evident. Daane utilizes a sort of theory of two-fold truth. It is not precisely the medieval theory of that name, but rather derives from Kierkegaard, Buber,

Brunner, the Neo-orthodox, and existentialists. But Daane does not give us much theory: He is satisfied to assert a great difference between propositional truth and personal truth. Two points should be made: First, personal truth is unintelligible; and, second, Daane seems to have no clear idea of what a person is.

First, one can easily state and explain the form of propositional truth. As said above, it consists of a subject connected by a copula to a predicate. By a clearly defined method we can arrange propositions into valid syllogisms and easily distinguish them from invalid syllogisms. But what is the form of personal truth? Are there universals and particulars? Are there valid and invalid inferences? Presumably not, for no one has ever derived twenty-four valid personal syllogisms nor 232 invalid ones. Personal truth can have no subjects, predicates, or copulas. What is it then? How does one distinguish between a personal truth and a personal falsity? When with Brunner one says that God and the medium of conceptuality are mutually exclusive, one makes God completely unknowable. If we talk *about* God, we are not talking about *God*. This is not what the inerrant Bible teaches.

Then, second, underlying the above is a deficient or completely lacking concept of a person. For Plato a human person was a soul who knew the Ideas. The World of Ideas was itself a living mind, as he explained in *The Sophist*. For Aristotle, the soul was the form of the organic body, and its individuality depended upon its unknowable matter. Locke made the soul an abstract idea, a spiritual substance, also unknowable; he called it "something I know not what." Hume "reduced" the person to a collection of sensations and memory images – a collection which, according to Kant, had never been collected. For it, Kant substituted his transcendental unity of apperception – also unknowable. Which of these does Daane prefer? Or does he have a different theory? I am afraid this is unknowable too.

In *1 Corinthians* 2:16 Paul says "we have the mind of Christ." The word *mind* is *nous*. How is it possible for us to have Christ's *nous*, unless his mind is the truth? We have Christ's mind insofar as we think his thoughts. Of course we are not omniscient; we do not think all his thoughts; and worse, we think some false propositions too. We are

what we think, just as Christ is what he thinks. His doctrine or teaching saves us from eternal death (*John* 8:51). He is the truth! Is this not what Scripture teaches? Christ is the *Logos*, his *rhemata* are truth; he is God's Wisdom; and *1 Samuel* 2:3 says, "the Lord is the God of knowledge." Daane's theory seems to imply that these propositions are some of the errors in our untrustworthy Bible. Henry and I believe that the Bible is trustworthy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though Henry and I are in extensive agreement, I do not intend to bind him to any of the above material beyond what he has explicitly stated in his publications.