

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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The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark by Douglas J. Douma

Reviewed by Thomas W. Juodaitis

Douglas Douma has written a well-researched and well-documented biography of Gordon Clark authorized by Clark's family, with a Foreword written by Clark's daughters, Lois A. Zeller and Betsy Clark George. Published by Wipf & Stock of Eugene, Oregon, *The Presbyterian Philosopher* is just under 300 pages with a lengthy bibliography and several indices – name, subject, and Scripture. In addition to the Foreword by Clark's daughters, Douma wrote an Introduction, and the contents include 13 chapters and three appendices, one of which is Clark's previously unpublished "Studies of the Doctrine of *The Complaint*," written in 1946-1947. The biography is endorsed by ten academicians, of which some were colleagues and /or students of Dr. Clark. The list includes Jay Adams, Kenneth Talbot, D. Clair Davis, David Engelsma, William S. Barker, Erwin Lutzer, Frank Walker, Dominic Aquila, Andrew Zeller, and John Frame. Douma presents the life and major thought of Gordon Haddon Clark, and his purpose for writing this biography is found in the last three paragraphs from his Introduction:

The supporters of Clark at present are few in number and lacking in high-profile academic posts, but those who comprehend his life's work recognize the power of his arguments. His theology has something to teach us, as does his life itself. If we ultimately reject Clark's views, we should do so only after thoroughly grappling with them. And if we are honest with ourselves, we will discover much in his works that challenge

fundamental beliefs, whether they be beliefs in science, philosophy, or mainstream Christianity.

To address the entirety of Clark's philosophical writings would require a volume far larger than the present one. I have endeavored therefore to discuss only those topics which I have deemed to be integral to Clark's life and philosophy. Certainly, zealous "Clarkians" will find fault in that I have not sufficiently addressed Clark's views on philosophical topics such as "common ground," traducianism, or the noetic effects of sin (among countless others he addressed). I must therefore beg the reader to find fault not in what I haven't written, but in what I have.

I am proud to say that Gordon Clark's writings helped keep me solidly grounded in the Christian faith when I was looking for a defense of it. Clark was not a compromiser, and this is perhaps why I have gravitated so much to him. His uncompromising stance shows a Christianity which is in fact intellectual, not relying simply on appeals to emotion or experience. It is my hope that the readers of this biography are strengthened in their confidence of the truth of the Christian faith through the arguments made by Gordon Clark and [the] life he lived out. (xxiv, xxv)

Chapter 1 "The Presbyterian Heritage of Gordon Clark," digs into the ancestral history of Clark, whose father, David Clark and grandfather, James Clark were both Presbyterian ministers. Gordon Clark was born into and raised in the Old School Presbyterian

tradition. The chapter not only traces his Presbyterian roots through his parents, but it also gives the reader a glimpse into the early family life of Gordon and Ruth Clark and their two daughters. The chapter also focuses on Gordon Clark's educational background both as a student and then as professor at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn).

Other chapters include in order: "Gordon Clark's Intellectual Influences," "Gordon Clark and the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," "Gordon Clark at Wheaton College," "The Origins of Presuppositionalism," "Origins of the Ordination Controversy," "The Arguments of the Ordination Controversy," "The Continued Controversy and Its Results," "The Butler University Years (1945-1973)," "Four Theological Contributions of Gordon H. Clark," "Clark's Boys," "Persons, the Trinity, and the Incarnation," and "Gordon Clark's Later Years." What is interesting about the narrative as a whole is the intersecting of 20th century American Presbyterianism throughout the life of Gordon Clark – thus the fitting title: *The Presbyterian Philosopher*. Because of his Presbyterian convictions and his commitment to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Clark played a role in various Presbyterian denominations throughout the 20th century, including the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) out of the liberal / modernist Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA), the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) after he was pushed out of the OPC by the Westminster faction in the aftermath of the Ordination Controversy (aka the "Clark-Van Til Controversy"), the Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod (RPC, GS) after the liberalizing of the UPCNA and a pending merger with the PCUSA, into a merger between the RPC, GS and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church forming the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod (RPCES), and when the RPCES was to be received / absorbed into the new Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Clark did not transfer his ministerial credentials to the PCA, but rather transferred them to the independent Covenant Presbytery. The controversies in which Clark took a principled stand included the Modernist controversy in the PCUSA, the Clark-Van Til Controversy in the OPC, and his refusal to agree to the merger of the RPCES with the PCA, or as Clark titled a paper he sent to the leaders of the RPCES, "The Proposal to Abolish the RPCES."

In each of these controversies Clark took not only a principled stand, but a Biblical stand, and history has demonstrated that he was on the side of truth, despite what the majority believed. Douma gives many of these details and analysis in his biography of Clark.

Three of the chapters in Douma's biography deal with the Ordination Controversy. In those chapters, Douma demonstrates through his analysis that Clark and his supporters were in the right and the OPC and the Westminster Seminary faction were in the wrong. Another reviewer wrote:

The OPC rejected him and virtually expelled him from its fellowship. It did this, despite the fact that, with Machen, Clark played a leading role in the formation of the OPC, as a reformation of the apostate Presbyterian churches in the early 20th century. It was Clark who nominated J. Gresham Machen as moderator of the first General Assembly of the newly formed Presbyterian Church of America, soon to be renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The OPC drove Clark out in spite of Clark's sterling orthodoxy and recognized gifts. Clark distinguished himself, not only in the church but also at Wheaton College, where he worked for some time as a professor, as basing all his thinking, philosophical as well as theological, firmly upon the Bible as summarized in the Westminster Standards. As for his gifts, the man was brilliant, as the content of his cornucopia of books and other writings witnesses. ...

Clark's leaving the OPC did not pacify his foes. They turned on his defenders in the denomination, particularly the missionary Floyd Hamilton. Their vindictive treatment of him drove Hamilton out of the OPC also. Many others left the OPC at that time. ...

The Gordon Clark case is unfinished business in the OPC.¹

¹ David J. Engelsma, "Review of *The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark*," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, Spring 2017, as viewed at "David Engelsma reviews *The Presbyterian Philosopher*," March 3, 2017, "A Place for Thoughts," <https://douglasdouma.wordpress.com/2017/03/03/david->

Another reviewer had a small bone to pick with Douma's analysis of the Ordination Controversy:

The one possible and admittedly very small bone I would pick with the author is that I don't see the passage cited from Van Til's *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (161) as providing any genuine agreement between Van Til and Clark. Instead of Van Til "almost coming around to Clark's position," I see it as a subtly worded evasion of the force of Clark's devastating critique of *The Complaint*. As far as I can tell Van Til provides nothing more than a restatement of *Acts* 17:28, while conceding absolutely nothing. Consider these passages from *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* in light of the question of the incomprehensibility of God and [see] whether or not there is any point of contact or coincidence between the truths known by God (all truth) and the knowledge possible to man (some truth):

For man any new revelational proposition will enrich in meaning any previous given revelational proposition. But even this enrichment does not imply that there is any coincidence, that is, identity of content between what God has in his mind and what man has in his mind.... There could and would be an identity of content only if the mind of man were identical with the mind of God. It is only on the assumption that the human mind is not the mind of a creature but is itself the mind of the Creator that one can talk consistently of identity of content between the mind of man and the mind of God. (270, 271)

[Man] never has and never can expect to have in his mind exactly the same thought content that God has in his mind. (295)

...the Christian position with respect to man's not knowing at any point just what God knows is based upon the presupposition of the self-contained God of Scripture. And this presupposition is the death of both rationalism and irrationalism. It is the death of both because it alone maintains the full dependence of the mind of man upon the mind of God.... To say therefore that the human mind can know even one proposition in its minimal

significance with the same depth of meaning with which God knows that proposition is an attack on the Creator-creature relationship and therewith an attack on the heart of Christianity. And unless we maintain the incomprehensibility of God as involved in and correlative to the idea of the all-controlling power and knowledge of God, we shall fall into the Romanist and Arminian heresy of making the mind of man at some points as ultimate as is the mind of God. (297, 298)²

The biography, however, is not all about controversy, but gives a picture of the life of the man himself, including his family life, his interaction with his students, as well as his pastoral labors in a Reformed Presbyterian church in Indianapolis. In fact, later in life while he taught at Covenant College, Clark took up painting, even taking classes from art professor, Ed Kellogg. Douma writes the following about Clark's artistic pursuits:

The nearly unanimous consensus among Clark's friends and family was that he was not a good artist. In fact, Clark admitted as much in a letter to Nick Barker at Covenant College: "Outside professional philosophy, I write terrible poems, paint worse pictures, and play mediocre chess" (GHC to Nick Barker, August 1979, Covenant College faculty file – footnoted in original). But Clark was not overly concerned about criticism; he painted for the sheer pleasure of the activity and out of love for God's creation. (230)

In chapter 10, Douma analyzes what he considers the "four theological contributions of Gordon Clark" as 1) "an axiomatized epistemological system," 2) "theological supralapsarianism," 3) "a solution to the problem of evil," and 4) "arguments for a return to traditional logic." Although Douma primarily relies on Clark's published works for his analysis, he also utilizes Clark's lectures, letters, and even some unpublished material that he uncovered in his research for this biography. Once again Doug Douma is to be commended for his thorough research.

² Sean Gerety, "The Authorized Biography of Gordon Clark – A Review," February 22, 2017, <https://godshammer.wordpress.com/2017/02/22/the-authorized-biography-of-gordon-h-clark-a-review/>, March 9, 2017.

Of note for readers of *The Trinity Review* is his brief subsection on John W. Robbins, the late founder of The Trinity Foundation, titled “John Robbins, Crusader for Clark’s Philosophy” on pages 232-235. Robbins founded The Trinity Foundation for the purpose of publishing Clark’s works, both newer titles and out-of-print titles. In the opinion of this writer, if Robbins had not “crusaded” for Clark’s works to be published by founding The Trinity Foundation, Clark’s works, it is feared, would have gone out of print. In fact, Douma writes the following:

...Clark appreciated Robbins’s (*sic*) hard work in editing his books and was glad to have a publisher for his books at a time when other publishers were uninterested. Robbins was dedicated to getting Clark’s works to a larger audience through the foundation; he even refused to take a salary for his work at the foundation until late into the 1990s. Robbins also wanted to write Clark’s biography, though he died before he could begin writing it. But even without the biography, Robbins’s (*sic*) efforts have proved to be of critical significance; for by publishing Clark’s books and his own, Robbins brought Clark’s thought to a new generation. (233-234)³

Unfortunately in the same section, Douma writes the following about the conflict Robbins had with Dwight Zeller and later about his conflict with Greg Bahnsen:

³ There are several footnotes in this paragraph citing interviews of Dwight Zeller, Clark’s son-in-law, and Linda Robbins, John Robbins’ widow. Douma ends the paragraph with the following footnote: “The author of this biography is a case in point, having first learned of Clark from the final pages of Robbins’s (*sic*) *Without a Prayer: The Close of Ayn Rand’s System* (*sic* – the subtitle is *Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*), a critique of Ayn Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism.” Additionally, Douma wrote in an email to this writer: “I found Gordon Clark’s works through John Robbins and The Trinity Foundation. It was in reading Robbins’ devastating critique of Ayn Rand’s philosophy [in] *Without a Prayer* that I first heard of Clark. Later, in searching for ‘Christian Intellectuals’ and ‘Christian Philosophy’ to seek a firmer foundation for my (then Lutheran) faith, I came across Clark’s *Introduction to Christian Philosophy* and so decided to give Clark a chance based on Robbins’ recommendation. That book was a complete paradigm shift for me and remains my favorite of Clark’s books. I credit Robbins therefore with bringing me to Clark and the great Reformed tradition.”

Robbins was fearlessly polemical and through the years alienated many, not only because of his views but also for the uncompromising zeal with which he held to them. An example of Robbins’s (*sic*) intractable personality and its results occurred at Sangre de Cristo Seminary. Robbins was hired there in the early 1990s as a visiting professor and taught a course in apologetics, taking over the course Clark had once taught. However, after a dispute in 1999 with the seminary’s founder, Dr. Dwight Zeller, Robbins was never invited back to teach. (234)

There are two sides to a dispute, but here the readers are only given the view from Zeller, as Robbins had passed, and it was impossible to interview him for this biography. Those who knew Robbins, know that he was valiant for truth no matter the personality who compromised it, and he was not afraid to name names. This stepped on many people’s toes. With this criticism aside, I agree with Sean Gerety’s conclusion, “this really is an outstanding biography of really a wonderful elder brother in Christ and one of the greatest minds of any generation.”⁴ Indeed, Douma’s research uncovered so much material that even Gordon Clark’s daughters begin their Foreword with the following:

THIS BIOGRAPHY IS THE result of the tireless efforts of the author in researching the life of Gordon Haddon Clark. So many facts, both trivial and momentous, have been uncovered in Clark’s books and correspondence, that we, his children, have been surprised at learning new details about our father, whom we thought we knew so well! (xiii)

A limited number of copies of *The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark* by Douglas J. Douma are available from The Trinity Foundation for \$30 per paperback (retail is \$37). You may also purchase directly from the publisher, Wipf & Stock at <http://wipfandstock.com/the-presbyterian-philosopher.html>.

⁴ See note 2 above.