

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.

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The Clark-Van Til Controversy

Herman Hoeksema

Editor's note: In 1943 Dr. Gordon H. Clark, who was to become the foremost Christian philosopher of the twentieth century, sought ordination in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a small denomination barely seven years old.

Dr. Clark was immediately opposed by the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, led by Professor Cornelius Van Til. Despite their zealous opposition, Dr. Clark was ordained by the OPC.

But the controversy was just beginning. In 1944 the Westminster Seminary faculty tried to remove Dr. Clark from office, not by filing charges against him, but by arguing that the procedure the OPC used to ordain him was irregular. They were struggling, not merely to prevent Dr. Clark from gaining influence in the denomination, but to retain their control of the Seminary as well.

The controversy that ensued raised some of the most important doctrinal issues of the century, issues that still resonate throughout all American churches: What does it mean to say that God is "incomprehensible"? Is God emotional? Is Scripture propositional revelation? Can men know the same truth that God knows? Is man's mind or are his emotions more fundamental? If God is omnipotent and sovereign, how can man be held responsible for his actions?

Herman Hoeksema, founder of the Protestant Reformed Churches, understood the significance of the controversy and wrote a series of incisive editorials in that denomination's magazine, The Standard Bearer. He argued that the irrationalism of the Westminster faculty disguised their Arminian doctrines, which they insisted were "truly Reformed." This book is a collection of those editorials.

To purchase the book, please send \$15.95 (\$9.95 plus \$6.00 shipping) to the address above.

1. Introduction: *The Text of a Complaint*

The above is the title of a lengthy printed protest by some members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

"against actions of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in the Matter of the Licensure and Ordination of Dr. Gordon H. Clark."

I had read about the controversy involved in *The Presbyterian Guardian*, but I had not seen the complete text of this protest. A friend was kind enough to send it to me, for the which I hereby offer him my sincere thanks.

It appears that on July 7, 1944, a special meeting of the Presbytery of Philadelphia was held, for the purpose of examining a certain Dr. Gordon H. Clark with a view to his licensure and ordination to the ministry. Against the fact that this meeting was called, as well as against its proceedings and decisions, the protest or "Complaint" is directed. It is signed by a dozen signatures, among which are the names of some well known to us: R. B. Kuiper, C. Van Til, and N. B. Stonehouse.

The first part of the *Complaint* concerns the calling of the special meeting. The protestants maintain that the meeting was illegally called, and conclude this part of their protest with the "request that the meeting of the Presbytery of Philadelphia held on July 7, 1944, be found to have been illegally convened and that its acts and decisions and the acts and decisions issuing therefrom be declared null and void" (2).

The rest of the protest, its main body, is divided into four parts, according as it discovers four serious errors in the theological conceptions of Dr. Clark – errors that became manifest, according to the complainants, in Dr. Clark's examination by the Presbytery, and in spite of which fact said Presbytery decided to license him and proceed to his ordination.

The first part deals with Dr. Clark's alleged erroneous views concerning the incomprehensibility and knowability of God (2-6).

The second part concerns Dr. Clark's "view of the relation of the faculty of knowledge, the intellectual faculty, to other faculties of the soul" (6-10).

The third part accuses Dr. Clark of maintaining “that the relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility to each other presents no difficulty for his thinking and that the two are easily reconcilable before the bar of human reason” (10-13).

The fourth part is an elaboration upon the statement that “in the course of Dr. Clark’s examination it became abundantly clear that his rationalism keeps him from doing justice to the precious teaching of Scripture that in the Gospel God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to all who hear, reprobate as well as elect, and that he has no pleasure in any one’s rejecting this offer but, contrariwise, would have all who hear accept it and be saved” (13-15).

Especially in view of the last alleged error of Dr. Clark, the reader can readily understand that we are rather interested in this controversy, and that we cannot refrain from making a few remarks about this *Complaint*...

7. Rationalism

The third indictment the complainants bring against Dr. Clark is really twofold: According to them, he is a rationalist and an antinomian.

The accusation of rationalism is based on the contention that Dr. Clark tries to solve problems, paradoxes, and contradictions, particularly the problem of the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Anyone who makes an attempt to solve this problem, who tries to harmonize these two, who claims that this solution is possible – and especially he who is ready to offer his solution of this problem – is, according to the complainants, a rationalist. We quote from the *Complaint*:

Dr. Clark asserts that the relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility to each other presents no difficulty for his thinking and that the two are easily reconcilable before the bar of human reason. He expresses surprise that so many theologians find an insuperable difficulty here [10].

The complainants then make several quotations from Reformed writers to show that by theologians of good standing the problem has always been considered insoluble. It presents an apparent contradiction which we are not able to harmonize. Both must be confessed – that God is absolutely sovereign and that man is responsible. But how they are to be harmonized is beyond the understanding of the human mind. Thus they quote from Berkhof, Calvin, Vos, A. A. Hodge, and Abraham Kuyper. And then the complainants continue:

Here then is a situation which is inadequately described as amazing. There is a problem which has baffled the greatest theologians in history. Not even Holy Scripture offers a solution. But Dr. Clark asserts unblushingly that for his thinking the problem has ceased to be a problem. Here is something phenomenal. What accounts for it? The most charitable, and no doubt the correct, explanation is that Dr.

Clark has come under the spell of rationalism. It is difficult indeed to escape the conclusion that by his refusal to permit the scriptural teaching of divine sovereignty and the scriptural teaching of human responsibility to stand alongside each other and by his claim that he has fully reconciled them with each other before the bar of human reason Dr. Clark has fallen into the error of rationalism. To be sure, he is not a rationalist in the sense that he substitutes human reasoning for divine revelation as such. But, to say nothing of his finding the solution of the problem of the relation to each other of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the teaching of pagan philosophers who were totally ignorant of the teaching of Holy Writ on either of these subjects, it is clear that Dr. Clark regards Scripture from the viewpoint of a system which to the mind of man must be harmonious in all its parts. The inevitable outcome is rationalism in the interpretation of Scripture. And that too is rationalism. Although Dr. Clark does not claim actually to possess at the present moment the solution of every scriptural paradox, yet his rationalism leaves room at best for only a temporary subjection of human reason to the divine Word... [12].

What shall we say about this accusation of rationalism?

First of all, we may note that it is an old one. There is nothing original in the findings of the complainants. They speak the language of the Christian Reformed leaders since about 1922-1924. From these they have, no doubt, learned to speak their theological language. Personally, we are very familiar with the accusation they now bring against Dr. Clark.

But what of the accusation itself?

The complainants speak of a “situation which is inadequately described as amazing,” and of “something phenomenal.” I must confess that these words express exactly my sentiment when I read this part of the *Complaint*. There is here, indeed, something that is more than amazing, that is really unbelievable, that might almost be catalogued as another paradox: the phenomenon that theologians accuse a brother theologian of heresy because he tries to solve problems!

For, mark you well, it is exactly this that these complainants do in this part of the *Complaint*. They simply accuse him of trying to find a solution, of claiming to have found a solution. Whether Dr. Clark has actually succeeded or not to discover a solution of the problem of God’s sovereignty in relation to man’s responsibility is not the question at all. Whether his solution is right or wrong has nothing to do with this part of the *Complaint*. The mere fact that Dr. Clark attempts to harmonize things makes him a heretic, a rationalist. Other theologians have always claimed that the problem is not capable of solution; the complainants themselves insist that in the problem of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility we face a paradox, a contradiction as far as we can see: This should have been sufficient to warn Dr. Clark against the attempt

to seek a solution. That he, nevertheless, did make the attempt shows that he is a heretic, a rationalist.

That, as it appears to me, is the whole argument of the complainants. And this is something which, to my mind, the word *amazing* is inadequate to describe. But what about the accusation of rationalism? Is it really rationalism to make the attempt to bring Scripture into harmony with itself? The complainants maintain that it is:

Dr. Clark regards Scripture from the viewpoint of a system which to the mind of man must be harmonious in all its parts. The inevitable outcome is rationalism in the interpretation of Scripture. And that too is rationalism.

The language of the complainants is somewhat ambiguous here, whether the ambiguity is intentional or accidental. The words might convey the impression that Dr. Clark begins with a system of thought, not derived from the Scriptures, and that now he proceeds to explain Scripture in such a way as to support that preconceived philosophical system. And that would, indeed, be rationalism. Scripture would then be distorted to fit Dr. Clark's system. But the complainants do not openly accuse him of this. The words may also mean that, according to Dr. Clark's view, there is in the revelation of the Word of God itself a harmonious system of truth, which, by careful exegesis, comparing Scripture with Scripture, the theologian attempts to bring to light and to formulate. And this seems to be the truth. Thus, at least, *The Answer* interprets Dr. Clark's attempt to harmonize divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We quote: "It is pertinent to note that Dr. Clark, instead of approaching these problems on a rationalistic basis, reaches his conclusion from an exegesis of Scripture" (37). And again:

Next, the attempt to find by a deeper study of the Scripture the solution of paradoxes – a use of exegesis that the complainants call rationalism – is in the eyes of the complainants incompatible with subjection of human reason to the divine Word.... In other words, a man who tries to understand what God has revealed to him cannot be subject to the revelation, and the more he understands, the less he is subject; probably the less he understands, the more subject he is; so that the really obedient and devout man must be completely ignorant. By what right do the complainants imply that the attempt to understand Scripture is inconsistent with believing Scripture? [37].

We may take it, then, that the attempt to harmonize Scripture with itself is, by the complainants, branded as rationalism.

This we absolutely deny.

Let the complainants prove their contention. They do not do this. They do not even make an attempt to prove this charge of rationalism. *The Answer* reduces the contention of the complainants, somewhat ironically, to absurdity, by showing that ultimately it leads to the conclusion that "the really obedient and devout man must be completely

ignorant."

But if the contention of the complainants is true, it certainly follows that all theology, and especially all dogmatics, is rationalistic, for it proceeds from the assumption that the truth revealed in the Bible can be formulated into a logical system.

No theologian has ever proceeded from the assumption of the complainants. Dogmatics is a system of truth elicited from Scripture. And exegesis always applied the rule of the *regula Scripturae*, which means that throughout the Bible there runs a consistent line of thought in the light of which the darker and more difficult passages must be interpreted. The complainants virtually deny this, at least, and that, too, rather arbitrarily, with relation to the problem of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

Who does not know that Reformed theologians have always interpreted those passages of Scripture, which at first sight seem to be in favor of the Arminian view, in the light of the current teaching of Holy Writ that salvation is of the Lord, that grace is sovereign, that the atonement is particular, and that man is not free to do good? According to the contention of the complainants, this is rationalism.

The complainants simply ride a recent Christian Reformed hobby.

As to "contradictions," I maintain that there are no such things in the revelation of God in Scripture, for the simple reason that Scripture teaches us everywhere that God is One, and that he cannot deny himself. His revelation, too, is one, and does not contradict itself.

No, but the complainants would say, there are no *real* contradictions, but there are *apparent* contradictions in the Bible nevertheless, and then we must leave severely alone, without even making an attempt at solution. We must simply and humbly accept them.

I most positively deny all of this.

By *apparent* contradictions the complainants mean propositions or truths that to the human mind, and according to human logic, are contradictory. I deny that there are such propositions in the Bible. If there were, they could not be the object of our faith. It is nonsense to say that we must humbly believe what is contradictory. This is simply impossible. The complainants themselves cannot believe contradictions. Contradictions are propositions that mutually exclude each other, so that the one denies the truth of the other. The principles of contradictions are: 1. That a thing cannot at the same time *be* and *not be*. 2. That a thing must either *be* or *not be*. 3. That the same property cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time of the same subject. A is A. A is not Not-A. Everything is either A or Not-A.

I challenge anyone to point out that there are propositions in the Bible that violate these fundamental principles of logic. I challenge anyone to prove that it is possible for the believer to accept such contradictions, or that it is Christian humility to claim such faith. Perhaps it may be worth the effort to apply these statements to the problem of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. But

this must wait until our next issue.

8. Sovereignty and Responsibility

The question is whether there is a real or apparent contradiction involved in the truth of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

Let us put both truths in propositional form:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, even so that he determines the moral acts of man, both good and evil.
2. Man is responsible before God for all his moral acts.

Now, the question is not whether there is a problem here. It may well be that we cannot answer the question how God is able to determine man's deeds without destroying man's responsibility. That he is able to do so is asserted plainly by the two propositions stated above. But whether or not we can understand this operation of the sovereign God upon man is not the question. The sole question is whether the two propositions concerning God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are contradictory. This we deny. In fact, they cannot possibly be, for the simple reason that they assert something about two wholly different subjects.

They would be contradictory if the first proposition denied what is affirmed in the second. But this is not true. The first proposition asserts something about God: He is absolutely sovereign and determines the acts of man. The second proposition predicates something about man: He is responsible for his moral acts. Does the first proposition deny that man is responsible? If it does you have here a contradiction. But it does not. Those who like to discover a contradiction here, usually the enemies of the truth of God's sovereignty, simply take for granted that to assert that God is sovereign even over man's acts is to say the same as that man is not responsible. It must be pointed out, however, that this is neither expressed nor implied in the first proposition. In the two propositions responsibility is not both affirmed and denied at the same time to man.

The two propositions would, of course, also be contradictory if the second proposition denied what is affirmed in the first. In that case, sovereignty even over the acts of man would be both affirmed and denied to God. But also this is neither expressed nor implied in the two propositions, unless it can first be shown conclusively that to say that man is responsible is the same as declaring that God is not sovereign over his moral acts. And this has never been demonstrated, nor is it self-evident.

If they were really contradictory they could not both be the object of the Christian's faith. We could only conclude that either the one or the other were not true.

Now, however, since they involve no contradiction, and since both are clearly revealed in Scripture, we accept both, whether or not we can combine them into one concept. And the attempt to do so, to solve the problem, must be considered laudable....

While the attempt on the part of Dr. Clark to solve this problem is labeled as *rationalism*, the solution he offers is

characterized as *antinomianism*. We quote from the *Complaint*:

The history of doctrine tells us that the view under discussion is far from innocent. The tenet that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are logically reconcilable has been held by two schools of thought, both of which claimed to be Reformed but neither of which was recognized as Reformed by Reformed churches. One of these schools is Arminianism. It meant to uphold both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, especially the latter, but in its rationalistic attempt to harmonize the two it did great violence to the former. The other school is Antinomianism. It also meant to uphold both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, especially the former, but in its rationalistic attempt to harmonize the two it did great violence to the latter....

Here attention must be called to his [Clark's] treatment of human responsibility in the article "Determinism and Responsibility."¹ Reformed theologians generally are exceedingly circumspect when they discuss the relation of the divine decree and divine providence to the sin of man. There is excellent reason for their carefulness. They are zealous to maintain God's holiness as well as His sovereignty, not to detract, after the manner of the Antinomians, from human responsibility. But Dr. Clark says boldly: "Does the view here proposed make God the Author of sin? Why the learned divines who formulated the various creeds so uniformly permitted such a metaphorical expression to becloud the issue is a puzzle. This view certainly makes God the First and Ultimate Cause of everything. But very slight reflection on the definition of responsibility and its implication of a superior authority shows that God is not responsible for sin" (22). It is meaningful that Dr. Clark is not careful to say, as so many Reformed theologians are, that God is not the efficient cause of sin (e.g., Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 108) [12].

And at the end of this part of the *Complaint* the complainants conclude that Dr. Clark's rationalism has resulted in his departing from the historic Reformed doctrine of human responsibility. In his attempt to reconcile by human reason divine sovereignty and human responsibility he has done decided violence to the latter [13]. Dr. Clark, therefore, is an antinomian rationalist, according to the complainants. His refusal to accept contradictions makes him "one-sided."

There is nothing original in this accusation.

It has become rather customary in recent years – especially since the Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 – to explain all forms of heresies as rationalistic attempts to solve contradictions resulting in one-sidedness. This makes it so very easy to classify one whom we seek to expose as a heretic! You can pick out almost any

¹ See *The Trinity Review*, January 1991.

classification you like. Thus, e.g., the undersigned has been labeled an Anabaptist, an Antinomian, an Arminian, a Barthian, etc.

The complainants adopt the same policy.

Arminianism, say they, is the result of a rationalistic attempt to reconcile God's sovereignty and human responsibility. So is Antinomianism. Both become one-sided in their attempt. So Dr. Clark tries to solve the same problem with the same result of one-sidedness on the Antinomian side. Hence, he is an Antinomian.

But is all this true? Or is it merely an attempt – a purely rationalistic attempt too – on the part of the complainants to find a heretical name for Dr. Clark? Is Arminianism really the result of an attempt to “uphold both divine sovereignty and human responsibility” as the complainants claim? Was it not from the very outset an attempt to deny and disprove the doctrine of absolute predestination and of the sovereignty of God in relation to the freedom of man? And is Antinomianism to be explained as an attempt to solve the problem of God's sovereignty and human responsibility? Anyone that is at all acquainted with the facts knows better. It was concerned with the relation of justification and good works and rejected the moral law as binding upon Christians. It is true that many of them were also strong in their emphasis on predestination, but this emphasis also was especially applied to their view of the justification of the elect. But Antinomianism cannot be called a rationalistic attempt to harmonize divine sovereignty and human responsibility. And whatever must be thought of Dr. Clark's attempt to solve this problem, it cannot be branded as Antinomian.

Besides, the indictment that Dr. Clark does violence to or denies the responsibility of man because of his one-sided emphasis on the sovereignty of God is only a conclusion which the complainants draw from some of his statements. Dr. Clark himself would never admit the truth of the conclusion. He never denies the responsibility of man, nor does he ever present God as the real author of human acts, though he insists that he determines them. He maintains only that “determinism is consistent with responsibility,” a statement which itself proves that he does not eliminate the responsibility of man in his attempt to harmonize it with God's sovereignty. It is always dangerous to draw conclusions from someone's statements in order then to attribute the conclusions to the author of the statements. Let us not forget that enemies of the truth drew conclusions from Paul's doctrine, accused him of Antinomianism (*Romans* 3:8; 6:1), and of making God the author of sin and denying the responsibility of man (*Romans* 9:19).

It seems to me that this part of the *Complaint* utterly fails to prove its point.

9. The Sincere Offer of the Gospel

The last point of the *Complaint* concerns the so-called sincere offer of salvation on the part of God to all men, particularly to the reprobate.

Here the *Complaint* descends from the stratosphere of philosophical contemplation and theological debate to the lower spheres of plain, even superficial reasoning, where even common mortals that may have been present at the examination of Dr. Clark, and at the subsequent debate about the questions involved, must have felt that they were able to participate in the discussion.

Here, too, the *Complaint* reveals, more clearly than anywhere else, its distinctly Christian Reformed tendency, particularly its sympathy with the three well-known decrees of the Synod of Kalamazoo, 1924.

Because it is especially on this point that the controversy of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, which, as it now appears, is to be continued in the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is identical with our own controversy with the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, it may not be superfluous to refresh our memory in this respect, so we will try to analyze the argument of the *Complaint* somewhat in detail.

If the standpoint of Dr. Clark with respect to the paradox of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility was described as more than amazing, his view *in re* the “well-meaning offer” is characterized as “surpassing strange” (13). The complainants put it this way:

In the course of Dr. Clark's examination by Presbytery it became abundantly clear that his rationalism keeps him from doing justice to the precious teaching of Scripture that in the gospel God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to all who hear, reprobate as well as elect, and that he has no pleasure in any one's rejecting this offer but, contrariwise, would have all who hear accept it and be saved [13].

Let us try to define the difference between the complainants and Dr. Clark as sharply as we can.

The difference is not that the complainants insist that the Gospel must be preached to all men promiscuously, while Dr. Clark claims that it must be preached only to the elect. This would be quite impossible, seeing that no preacher is able to single out the elect and separate them from the reprobate in this world. They are agreed that the Gospel must be preached to all men.

Nor is the difference that the complainants openly deny the doctrine of reprobation, while Dr. Clark professes to believe this truth. We read in the *Complaint*: “He believes – as do we all – the doctrine of reprobation” (13).

Again, the difference does not consist in that the complainants characterize the Gospel as an “offer” of Christ or as salvation, while Dr. Clark objects to that term. If the term “offer” is understood in the sense in which it occurs in the confessions, and in which also Calvin uses it (*offere*, from *obfero*, meaning *to present*), there can be no objection to that term, though, to prevent misunderstanding, it would be better to employ the words *to present*, and *presentation*.

Again, even though Dr. Clark objects to the word “sincere” in the sense in which the complainants use that

term, afraid to leave the impression that he preaches Arminianism, even this does not touch the real point of difference between them. That God is sincere in the preaching of the Gospel no one would dare to deny. As the complainants rightly ask: "Would it not be blasphemy to deny this?" (13)

But the difference between them does concern *the contents* of the Gospel that must be preached promiscuously to all men. It is really not a question to *whom* one must preach, or *how* he must preach, but *what* he must preach.

According to the complainants, the preacher is called to proclaim to all his hearers *that God sincerely seeks the salvation of them all*. If this is not their meaning when they write: "in the gospel God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to all who hear, reprobate as well as elect," their words have no meaning at all.

According to Dr. Clark, however, the preacher proclaims to all his hearers promiscuously *that God sincerely seeks the salvation of all the elect*. The elect may be variously named in the preaching: those who repent, they that believe in Christ, that hunger for the bread of life, that thirst for the water of life, that seek, knock, ask, that come to Christ, etc. etc. But they are always the elect.

We may define the issue still more sharply, and limit it to God's intention and attitude in the preaching of the Gospel *with regard to the reprobate*.

For it is more especially about the reprobate and their salvation that the complainants are concerned. Strange though it may seem, paradoxical though it may sound, they want to leave room in their preaching for *the salvation of the reprobate*. For the sake of clarity, therefore, we can safely leave the elect out of our discussion. That God sincerely seeks their salvation is not a matter of controversy. To drag them into the discussion of this question simply confuses things. The question very really concerns the attitude of God with respect to the reprobate. We may limit the controversy to this question: *What must the preacher of the Gospel say of God's intention with respect to the reprobate?* And these, too, may be called by different names, such as, the impenitent, the wicked, the unbelievers, etc.

The answer to this question defines the difference between Dr. Clark and the complainants sharply and precisely.

The complainants answer: The preacher must say that God sincerely seeks the salvation of the reprobate through the preaching of the Gospel.

Dr. Clark answers: That is not true; the preacher may never say that in the name of God. And, in the light of Scripture, he should say: God seeks his own glory and justification in preparing the reprobate for their just damnation even through the preaching of the Gospel.

That, in thus formulating the difference, I am not doing an injustice to the complainants is very plain from their own words. They say that in the preaching of the Gospel God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to the reprobate, that He

has no pleasure in their rejection of the offer, that he would have them, the reprobate, accept the Gospel, and that he would have them be saved. Besides, it is in this sense that they interpret *Ezekiel* 33:11: God has no pleasure in the death of the reprobate, he would have them live; and 2 *Peter* 3:9: God does not will that the reprobate should perish, but that they all come to repentance; and *Matthew* 23:37: Christ would have gathered the reprobate under his wings; and *1 Timothy* 2:3, 4: God our Saviour will have all the reprobate to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth (13, 14). And it is with the doctrine of universal salvation in mind that they write: "The supreme importance for evangelism of maintaining the Reformed doctrine of the gospel as a universal and sincere offer is self-evident" (14).

Now, you might object, as also Dr. Clark does, that this involves a direct contradiction: God sincerely seeks the salvation of those whom He has from eternity determined not to save. Or: God would have that sinner live whom He does not quicken. Or: God would have the sinner, whom He does not give faith, to accept the gospel. Or: God would have that sinner come to Christ whom He does not draw and who cannot come.

You might object that this is not rational.

But this objection would be of no avail to persuade the complainants of their error. They admit that this is irrational. But they do not want to be rational on this point. In fact, if you should insist on being rational in this respect, they would call you a "rationalist," and at once proceed to seek your expulsion from the church as a dangerous heretic. The whole *Complaint* against Dr. Clark is really concentrated in and based on this one alleged error of his: He claims that the Word of God and the Christian faith are not irrational. According to the complainants, to be reasonable is to be a rationalist. They write that the trouble with Dr. Clark is that

his rationalism does not permit him to let the two stand unreconciled alongside each other. Rather than do that he would modify the gospel in the interest of reprobation. [This, you understand, is a slanderous remark. – H.H.] Otherwise expressed, he makes the same error as does the Arminian, although he moves in the opposite direction. The Arminian cannot harmonize divine reprobation with the sincere divine offer of salvation to all who hear; hence, he rejects the former. Neither can Dr. Clark harmonize the two, and so he detracts from the latter. Rationalism accounts for both errors [13].

To accuse the complainants of irrationalism is, therefore, of no avail as far as they are concerned. They openly admit – they are even boasting of – their irrational position. To be irrational is, according to them, the glory of a humble, Christian faith.

We shall, therefore, have to prove to them that in their claim that God sincerely seeks the salvation of the reprobate in the preaching of the Gospel, they not only

contradict themselves, but they directly contradict Scripture.

And this we hope to do, not because Dr. Clark is in need of our defense, but because we are interested in the pure Reformed truth, and cannot allow it to be camouflaged and corrupted by some self-confessed irrationalists.

But before we proceed to do so, we must prove two things: 1. That the position of the complainants is not irrational as they claim, but involves an Arminian conception of reprobation. 2. That their argumentation on this point in the *Complaint* is very superficial, and characterized by many errors.

In this issue, we will have room to elucidate only point 1.

After all, even though the complainants themselves insist on being irrational, we will have to deal with them according to the rules of logic. If they refuse to be treated rationally, they really forfeit the right to present a complaint to any assembly of normal Christians. And treating them as rational human beings, we must insist that they do not and cannot possibly accept the proposition: God sincerely seeks the salvation of those whom he has sovereignly from eternity determined to be damned.

In other words: I know that they claim to believe this, but I deny their claim; I do not accept it.

Hence, I must try to rationalize their position for them. How can any man, with a show of rationality, insist that God sincerely seeks the salvation of the reprobate? Only when they define *reprobation* as that eternal act of God according to which he determined to damn all those whom he eternally foresaw as rejecting the Gospel.

In other words, I insist that the position of the complainants, as soon as you reject their claim to irrationalism, is purely Arminian. And their irrationalism is only an attempt to camouflage their real position.

15. An Arminian Gospel

If I should refer to all the passages of Holy Writ that prove that the complainants contradict Scripture when they insist that God sincerely seeks the salvation of the reprobate through the preaching of the Gospel, this discussion would become practically endless. And I intend to conclude it in this article. Hence, I will make just a few selections, in order that it may become abundantly evident that my position is not based on human reason, but on the revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Let us attend to *Matthew* 11:25-27, the context of that well known passage: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." We read there:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank you, O Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, because you have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in your sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father; and no man knows the Son, but the Father; neither knows any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Father will reveal him.

Let us, in connection with this passage, briefly notice the following points of importance:

1. That Jesus here *answered*. Answered whom? Evidently, the Father. But to what do his words and thanksgiving here contain an answer? To something the Father had done, and that, too, through the preaching and labors of our Saviour. This is evident from the context. While the Lord preached the Gospel of the kingdom and performed his mighty works, a twofold effect had become evident.

There were the mighty, who always took the kingdom of God by force, whether it was John or Jesus that preached its Gospel; and there were the miserable men of that generation, whom Jesus compares to the children in the market, calling unto their fellows: "We have piped unto you, and you have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and you have not lamented." Never did they enter the kingdom of Heaven. John preached it, but they said that he had a devil, because he came neither eating nor drinking; Jesus came eating and drinking, and they called him a glutton and winebibber. To John they piped, and he would not dance; hence, they must have nothing of his Gospel. Before Jesus they lamented, and he would not mourn; and, therefore, they rejected his Gospel. And in connection with this latter effect of his preaching, the Lord upbraids the cities, "wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not" (20). A twofold effect, therefore, had become manifest under the same preaching.

2. That Jesus ascribes this twofold effect to the work of the Father. He is the Lord of Heaven and Earth, sovereign also with respect to the work of salvation. The preaching of the Gospel becomes effective only through his power and operation. And that operation is twofold: He hides the things of the kingdom of God, and he reveals them.

3. That all this is quite in harmony with the truth, that no man knows the Son, but the Father; and that no one can know the Father, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.

4. That the ultimate reason and cause of this operation of the Father, according to which, even under the preaching of the Gospel, he hides and reveals, is the good pleasure of God: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight."

Now let the complainants make plain that they do not flatly contradict these words of Jesus when they insist that God sincerely seeks the salvation of the reprobate through the preaching of the Gospel.

May I, further, just remind the complainants of the passage in *Romans* 9:1-18? And let it suffice to point out the main line of the apostle's argument. He explains the fact that many Israelites had not obtained salvation, while the remnant obtained it, from the sovereign purpose of God concerning election and reprobation. The Word of God had not become of none effect, even though many Israelites were not saved, for only the children of the promise are counted for the seed. And there are the elect

in distinction from the reprobate, Jacob in distinction from Esau. Even in relation to Israel as a nation God remains sovereign to save whom he will: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (15). And, after he referred to God's sovereign dealings with Pharaoh, he concludes this section with the words: "Therefore he has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens."

I would very much like to see the complainants explain this passage in such a way that it becomes plain that they do not openly contradict the Scriptures when they hold that God sincerely seeks the salvation of the reprobate.

One more passage, 2 *Corinthians* 2:14-16:

Now thanks be unto God, who always causes us to triumph, and makes manifest the savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish: To the one we are a savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life. And who is sufficient unto these things?

The point here is: 1. That the apostles, in their preaching of the Gospel, are both a savor of death unto death, and a savor of life unto life. And 2. That in both cases they are a sweet savor of Christ unto God. And the preacher of the Gospel that is not willing to be such a sweet savor unto God in them that are saved and in them that perish simply cannot be a minister of the Word of God.

What becomes of the contention of the complainants that God sincerely seeks the salvation of all men, the reprobate included, through the preaching of the Gospel?

And what to think of their final statement: "The supreme importance for evangelism of maintaining the Reformed doctrine of the Gospel as a universal and sincere offer of salvation is self-evident"?

Do they, in this statement, not reveal their real intention? They first claimed that the Reformed doctrine of the Gospel honors the paradox, the contradiction: God wills to save all men; he wills to save only the elect. Must they, then, not preach that paradox, if they would proclaim the full Gospel, according to their own contention? Must they not do justice to that Gospel, and hide nothing of it, whether in "evangelistic" work or in the ministry of the Word in the Church?

But no; here they tacitly admit that, for evangelistic purposes, their paradoxical Gospel is not suitable. And so they propose to forget the one side of their paradox, and to present the Gospel only as a "universal and sincere offer of salvation." And that means that they intend to limit themselves to the proclamation that God sincerely seeks the salvation of all men.

In practice, they intend to preach an Arminian gospel.