

## **"Bahnsen Contra Flood/Robbins"**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

June 11, 1988

Dear Mr. Flood,

I regret that my recent letter in *Journey* magazine brought you such consternation as to illicit a nine-page complaint. It really did not warrant such a weighty effort! (Clark and Robbins together called for less than two pages in my note, and I deserve even less than them, as you might see it.)

I also regret that you have misjudged so widely the main purpose of my note and the spirit with which it was written. Let me try to do a better job of making such things clear. The main purpose of the brief note - expressed in the larger part of it - was to encourage (certainly not "intimidate") *Journey's* editor not to allow the magazine to descend to the nasty, shallow, and factious intercourse characteristic in John Robbins' writing. The name-calling (e.g. "neo-orthodox") has become intellectually adolescent and productive of nothing constructive in Reformed circles. Biblically-based rebuke is long overdue here, I think. If there is "party spirit" in the air, it comes not from my note, but precisely from what Mr. Robbins often writes. And that was the brunt of my concern. I hope you share it.

Now then, in contemporary Reformed circles, if you criticize the bad manners of a writer, it sometimes happens that your sincere remarks are dismissed as somehow evading substantive dispute. (Unless I am mistaken, your own letter does this very thing on pp. 7-8.) I thus felt it prerequisite to introduce my main concern (bad manners) with an ever-so-brief indication that the "substance" of the Clark-Robbins position could also be readily challenged, if need be. But I dealt with this simply by means of one illustration (as my letter said), not systematic analysis. But even that brief illustration is reason enough, as I presently see it, not to categorize the position as serious Reformed scholarship. My letter called it the "first reason" why publishing Robbins in *Journey* was regrettable. The "second reason" is even more compelling - since the first reason apparently cannot be debated or discussed with Robbins (and Clark previously) without acrimony.

I have a good spirit toward Dr. Clark personally, and there are portions of his writings from which I have profited and would recommend to others. And as much as I would love the easy path of singing "everything is beautiful, in its own way" about every professedly Reformed writer, intellectual honesty simply will not let me do it. In as person-neutral fashion as I can, I have to admit that an analysis of Clark (and Robbins) leaves me unable to applaud the heart of his philosophical position. It is, in my humble opinion, really weak and often crabbed and

embarrassing. We probably will differ on that point, Tony, but please do not let that intellectual assessment become a personal point of hostility between us as fellow believers.

Before closing, let me add a random list of comments in response to specific things you have said in your letter.

I do not feel that Van Til's distinctive views should be made a test of orthodoxy, but I do think that Clark's distinctive views contradict longstanding Reformed orthodoxy, e.g. the *Westminster Confession*. How then, you ask, did Clark and do Robbins endorse and write about the *WCF*? After some years of reflection my guess would be that, ironically, they do not understand or interpret it (at some points) in a correct way.

After re-reading my letter to *Journey*, I could not identify any "insinuations" or "indignant exclamations." Nor did I say anything about "conspiring heresiarchs." Let me ask you, Tony if this (groundless) manner of describing things would not tend to provoke antagonistic dialogue. That is what we are trying to avoid.

I have not "given credence to a commonplace reaction" to Clark's anti-empirical epistemology. The reaction is my own, based on extensive analysis, even before reading similar sentiments which were published by other writers. I do not agree with you that "what is required is an argument" against Clark's uncommonly held position. That argument has already been persuasively presented (at least twice in Clark's own festschrift.) Neither Clark nor Robbins have an answer for it, as I evaluate the debate. I am sorry that you hastily assumed that I am unfamiliar with the exchange between Clark and Nash (and others) on this point. If you consult the footnotes to my letter, you will see otherwise. I would also caution you or anyone to do considerable study of the issues involved in the epistemological discussion of "sensation" before challenging someone else to a public debate regarding them. This is a far more difficult matter than even Clark seemed to realize.

I agree with you that the issue of incomprehensibility was never fully joined by Van Til and Clark in their lifetimes. Hopefully John Frame's discussion of it is a second-best, but very helpful, substitute. You are mistaken if you think that my letter was intended to "wield (my) prestige to discourage (others) from studying and critically discussing" the matter. I encourage anyone to do so, so that they might see that my summary criticisms of Clark are far more than mere "ridicule" (as you charge).

RE: p. 6, #1 - I conclude that Dr. Clark contradicted himself regarding general revelation.

RE: p. 6, #2 - unless the universal "you" of I John 5:13 is literally universal (i.e., every single person who reads the words is actually saved), Clark's epistemology still brings him into conflict with the Confession, since "self-identification" of himself as a believer cannot be deduced from the words of Scripture.

RE: p. 7, #3 - I have read *The Johannine Logos*, and I found it incredibly unpersuasive, both philologically and theologically. If John's "logos" were a reference to anything like Aristotle's conception of logic, the Greek word would not have been "logos" at all.

RE: the use of Matt. 10:24 (p. 8) - You have completely misjudged me here. I was not using the passage sarcastically or as "cutting talk" whatsoever. The principle cited by Jesus applies axiomatically, and I was simply applying that principle to the Clark-Robbins situation. If Clark does not warrant attention, a fortiori neither does Robbins. Surely you agree with that logic (used by Jesus), even if you do not agree with the major premise.

Again, I do not wish to deny anyone the opportunity to debate these "issues" (as you put it). But nor do I agree that Clark's writings have done anything to make them live-issues which still call for a response. The critiques which a variety of people have already given do not leave Clark's position very appealing or challenging. If prima facie plausibility can be given to the distinctive position(s) taken by Clark on these "issues," then a debate would be warranted. But not until then. Life is short; time is precious. Thus we must all prioritize and choose our battles selectively. And it is my personal opinion (not at all trying to "play the heavy," as you charge) that dealing any further with Clark's distinctive views is a poor use of time. This is neither to "proscribe" nor to "intimidate" (your vocabulary again). It is (1) a judgment regarding the status of the Clark-debate to this point in the circles of evangelical scholarship, plus (2) a personal suggestion about needed priorities, plus (3) a recognition of the nature and function of a magazine like *Journey*. The reform of sagging presbyterianism in our time is too important for the magazine to be distracted by divisive and rancorous diatribes with John Robbins. Your letter, Tony, has not changed my assessment here, but reinforced it. Let's find another forum for the followers of Clark to continue thrashing the fideistic and anti-empirical distinctives of the good doctor. In the mean time, let *Journey* continue to encourage Clarkians and Van Tillians and all other "old school presbyterians" to stem the tide of doctrinal imprecision, anti-Confessional sentiment, capricious government and broad-churchmanship in the presbyterian churches of our day. I believe Dr. Clark would have given his hand to such a project, side-by-side with Dr. Van Til.

Cordially yours,

Greg L. Bahnsen