

April 29, 1947

Dear Dr. Clark,

I would like to call your attention to the underlying doctrinal unity which still exists in our Church and to suggest an approach to this whole question of divine and human knowledge which will conserve and develop this unity to the mutual benefit of all.

Since Truth and Knowledge are attributes of God, we must preface our discussion of them by a general discussion of the attributes of God. What are the attributes of God? Hodge defines them as the perfections of God which are "essential to the nature of a divine Being, and necessarily involved in our idea of God." Hodge goes on to say that in discussing the attributes of God there are two extremes which must be avoided. "First, we must not represent God as a composite being, composed of different elements; and, secondly, we must not confound the attributes, making them all mean the same thing, which is equivalent to denying them altogether." Now then, it seems to me that, if we are to avoid these two extremes of which Hodge speaks, we must assert the paradox that God's attributes are distinct from one another and yet each of God's attributes is identical with God's essence, i. e., with God Himself. And this paradox leads us on to another paradox, viz., that each attribute of God is both unity and diversity, both one and many. For, since each attribute of God is identical with God's essence, i. e., with God Himself, it follows that each attribute is unity in the same sense that God Himself is unity and diversity in the same sense that God Himself is diversity. God is unity in the sense that He is undivided and indivisible. He is diversity in the sense that there exist in Him distinctions as to His attributes, as to His personal properties as Father and Son and Holy Spirit, as to His counsels, and as to His works of creation and providence. And in this same sense each of God's attributes is both unity and diversity, both one and many.

Truth is an attribute of God. It is at once that Reality to which God conforms (or is faithful) and the cause of this conformity (or faithfulness). And since all created things conform to God, Truth can be further defined as that Reality to which all created things conform (or are faithful) and also the cause of this conformity (or faithfulness). Moreover, since Truth is an attribute of God, it is both unity and diversity, both one and many. Truth is identical with God's essence, and therefore it is unity as God is unity and diversity as God is diversity. Thus it is correct to speak both of The Truth and of truths. When we speak of The Truth, we refer to Truth in its unity. When we speak of truths, we refer to Truth in its diversity.

God's Knowledge is also one of His attributes. It is both the cause and the object of God's knowing. In other words, God knows because he has Knowledge, and that which He knows is His Knowledge. And, like all other attributes of God, God's Knowledge is identical with His essence. Therefore, God's Knowledge is unity as God Himself is unity and diversity as God Himself is diversity.

The revealed Truth is Truth in its diversity as it is partially disclosed to us by God. Thus The Truth in its unity is not revealed to us but only truths, i. e., Truth in its diversity. In other words, the revealed Truth is God's partial disclosure of Himself in His diversity, i. e., in the diversity of His attributes, personal properties, counsels, and works.

Man's knowledge is the revealed Truth as both the cause and the object of his knowing. In other words, man's knowledge is that portion of the revealed Truth which establishes contact with man's mind and thus both causes him to know and becomes the thing which he knows.

The damage which sin does to man's mind can be summed up in two words, viz., imbecility and perversity. By imbecility is meant that weakness of the mind which renders it insensitive to Truth, so that many truths touch it without evoking from it the response of knowing. By perversity is meant the tendency of the mind to fill up the void caused by imbecility with imaginations (or fancies), which when utilized in this way become delusions (or falsehoods). Thus, whether the knowledge of the unregenerate man differs from the knowledge of the regenerate man depends on the strictness with which we define man's knowledge. If we allow that the delusions with which the unregenerate man supplements his knowledge are also knowledge, then it is obvious that the knowledge of the unregenerate man is different from that of the regenerate man in so far as the regenerate man is free from these delusions. But if we define man's knowledge more strictly as only that portion of the revealed Truth which makes fruitful contact with his mind and thus evokes his knowing process and becomes the object of that process, then it is obvious that, whenever the same portion of the revealed Truth makes such contact with the minds of both regenerate and unregenerate men simultaneously, the knowledge of both classes of men is identical as far as this portion of the revealed Truth is concerned.

Similarly, there is a sense in which God's Knowledge differs from man's knowledge only quantitatively, and there is also a sense in which God's Knowledge differs from man's knowledge qualitatively as well as quantitatively. If we consider God's Knowledge in its diversity only, then we may well say that it differs from our knowledge only quantitatively. For God's Knowledge, thus defined, is a knowledge of Himself in His diversity, and our knowledge is a knowledge of the revealed Truth, which is God's partial disclosure of Himself in His diversity. But if we consider God's Knowledge in both its unity and its diversity, then we must admit that God's Knowledge differs from our knowledge both qualitatively and quantitatively. God's Knowledge, thus defined, transcends both our experience and our comprehension. It is God Himself as both unity and diversity. It transcends our experience because God has never revealed Himself to us in both His unity and His diversity and never will so reveal Himself to us. It transcends our comprehension because we can never comprehend how God can be both unity and diversity or even what it is to be both unity and diversity.

I am not advocating an outward unity at the price of doctrinal disunity or of indifference to sound doctrine. I am merely expressing the hope that all of us will become aware of the doctrinal unity which now exists in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and that we will cherish and develop this unity as a very precious thing.

Yours sincerely,

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Dear Dr. Clark,

I would like to submit the following brief discussion of propositions and the understanding of propositions in the hope that it will be found helpful for the promotion of doctrinal unity in our Church.

What are words and propositions? In the first place, we may say that they are one of the instruments which God employs to reveal Truth unto men. We say one of the instruments because God also employs other instruments to reveal Truth unto men, e.g., the workings of nature, the moral conscience, self-consciousness, etc. And when we say that by means of propositions God reveals Truth unto men, we must be understood as meaning Truth in its diversity, not in its unity. Truth is an attribute of God. As such it is identical with God's essence. Thus, it is unity as God is unity and diversity as God is diversity. God does not reveal unto men Truth in its unity, but He does reveal unto them a portion of Truth in its diversity. In other words, God reveals truths unto men, i.e., some of the distinctions which exist in Him in regard to His attributes, personal properties, counsels, and works of creation and providence. And some of these truths He reveals (or conveys) by means of propositions.

In considering the question whether man's knowledge of a proposition is identical with God's Knowledge of that same proposition, we must constantly bear in mind that God's Knowledge is His attribute. As such it is identical with His being and is unity as He is unity and diversity as He is diversity. Thus, in so far as God's Knowledge is both unity and diversity or unity apart from diversity, it is altogether different from man's knowledge, but, in so far as God's Knowledge is diversity apart from unity, it consists of distinctions within the being of God which man also knows when God reveals them unto him. When, therefore, we are referring to God's Knowledge in its diversity only, we may say that a distinction in God which is conveyed to man by means of a proposition constitutes an identical portion both of God's Knowledge and of man's knowledge.

God also gives men the gift of utterance in order that they may re-convey to their fellow-men by means of propositions the truths which have been conveyed to them by God. If men were sinless they would not use language for any other purpose but this, but, because they are sinful, they often abuse the gift of utterance to convey to others not only the truths which have been conveyed to them by God but also the delusions and falsehoods which proceed entirely from their own minds.

There are at least three types of truth which may be conveyed by propositions. There is the central (or essential) truth of a proposition, viz., the truth to which the proposition immediately refers and which it directly conveys. But every proposition must prepare our minds for this central by first conveying to them a preliminary truth which may be called the verbal truth. This is the truth concerning the wording of the proposition, i.e., the truth that the words of the proposition as they are used in conjunction with one another mean thus and so. Also, propositions often convey to our minds truths which are not, to be sure, explicitly stated in the proposition but which, nevertheless, are suggested by it. These truths may be called suggested (or related) truths.

The propositions recorded in the Scriptures convey spiritual truths. These truths are called spiritual because sinful man cannot receive them or know them without regeneration by the Holy Spirit. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." And the Scriptures often assure us that unregenerate men are mentally blind, e.g., Rom. 1:21 and II Cor. 4:5. Therefore, I think that everyone in our Church will concede that unregenerate and regenerate men do in some way differ in regard to their understanding of such propositions as I Cor. 15:3 "Christ died for our sins according the Scriptures," even though there may be disagreement as to the nature of this difference.

And yet it seems to me that even this disagreement is not so serious as perhaps it seems to some to be. I believe that everyone will agree that it is possible for an unregenerate man to know the verbal truth of such passages of Scripture as I Cor. 15:3. That is to say, it is possible for an unregenerate man to know what the words of I Cor. 15:3 mean as they stand in conjunction with one another. And similarly, all will doubtless agree that it is possible for an unregenerate man to know many truths which are suggested by propositions such as I Cor. 15:3. For example, it is possible for an unregenerate man to know that in the Four Gospels Jesus is reported as using language very similar to that of I Cor. 15:3. Thus it is possible for an unregenerate man to write a commentary in which related passages of Scripture are brought together in a very helpful manner.

And on the other hand, surely, no one will venture to dispute that that which the unregenerate man regards as his knowledge of I Cor. 15:3 is very different from the knowledge which the regenerate man has of this same verse. For in that which unregenerate men sincerely believe to be their knowledge of I Cor. 15:3 and which they exhibit as such in their commentaries is included all manner of delusions.

The only remaining question is whether the unregenerate man has any knowledge at all of the central (or essential) truth of I Cor. 15:3. Does he in any sense know that Christ did indeed die for sinners? In answering this question we must remember that the knowing process varies in its intensity and its permanence. On some unregenerate men the Truth of the Gospel makes no impression at all. They forget it as soon as they hear it. "These are they by the wayside." On other unregenerate men the Truth of the Gospel makes only a shallow and temporary impression. These are the stony and the thorny ground. They know I Cor. 15:3 in but a faint and temporary fashion. They may be "almost persuaded", but eventually they drop away. On the regenerate man, however, the Truth of the Gospel makes a deep and indelible impression. Such a man knows I Cor. 15:3 permanently and so intensely as to move his regenerate will to respond to this Gospel Truth by embracing Jesus Christ as his own Saviour. And further, even among the regenerate there are great differences as to the intensity with which the Truth of the Gospel is known. There are those whose faith is very weak and vacillating, and there have been those like the Apostle Paul, who was penetrated through and through by the Gospel Truth and whose one desire was to be ever more penetrated. "That I may know Him" was his enthusiastic cry.

Sincerely yours,

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