

THE NEW EVANGELICALISM AND APOLOGETICS

by
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Apologetics generally has to do with the defense of the truth-claims of Christianity. The word apologetics comes from the Greek *apologia*, a term from criminal law and the courts meaning to make a speech of defense, a verbal defense, a reply to a formal charge—an answer or a vindication. The word *apologia* is used as a verb, noun, or adjective twenty times in the New Testament.¹

One of the complaints of the new evangelicals, and one of the reasons for the break to form a new evangelical coalition in the 1940s, was fundamentalism's alleged intellectual deficiency and inability. This dissatisfaction eventually led to the formation of the Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, one purpose of which was to create an academic center and think tank for evangelical apologetics and philosophy of religion. The new evangelicals were annoyed with what appeared to them to be evangelism carried on by proof-texting and narrations of personal experiences. This was no way, in their opinion, to make the truth-claims of Christianity intellectually respectable and to penetrate the culture for Christ. The plan here is to note some of the various apologetic methodologies, especially noting and analyzing the system championed among early new evangelicals and put forth as sort of the "official" position of the movement.

At the center of any defense and propagation of the truth-claims of Christianity stands the matter of ultimate and absolute authority, an authority for which no greater authorization can be given. This in turn will control the apologetic method from starting point to conclusion, and will have long-range ramifications and wider implications for the

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¹Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), p. 1; BAGD, s.v. "ἀπολογία" p. 96; U. Falkenroth, "Punishment," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:97.

future of the movement it characterizes. It will be seen that the leaders of the new evangelicalism in fifty years have abandoned the sense of an absolute and infallible religious authority, and today the evangelical movement is groping to find some kind of a basis or an authority to meet a rootless, non-absolutist, relativist culture on the culture's own terms with the claims of the living and true God. On the surface this appears to be an utterly impossible task.

VARIETIES OF APOLOGETIC SYSTEMS

There are different methods of classifying systems of apologetics and how divine authority is arrived at. In addition, there is some disagreement among evangelicals and fundamentalists over exactly what is the role of Christian apologetics. Some would argue that it is in the main, if not only, defensive in character, i.e., how to defend the faith from its detractors. Edward John Carnell said that Christian apologetics "is that branch of Christian learning devised to assist a person in the defense of his faith.... Apologetics is simply Christianity defensively stated."² Others contend, and I agree, that apologetics is propagational or evangelistic in motif as well as defensive. However for purposes of this essay, that distinction does not loom as very significant.

In my understanding, Christian apologetics consists essentially of a defense and a propagation of the Christian faith. It is a methodology that deals with a message—how to defend and present the biblical message or the truth-claims of biblical Christianity. There are broadly three approaches to this task. It can be argued that all apologetic systems would either fit one of these three or a combination of them.³ The first method may be called total rationalism or non-presuppositionalism. This is basically assuming an epistemology, or a method of knowing, by which one can proceed from the ground up in arriving at and defending a comprehensive philosophy allegedly without having any prior commitment to a system or world view. One

²Edward John Carnell, "How Every Christian Can Defend His Faith," *Moody Monthly* (Jan 1950): 312.

³Gordon R. Lewis presented six apologetic systems (*Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1976]). More recently James Emery White used five evangelical apologists as a paradigm of the field (*What is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* [Nashville: Broadman, 1994]). Norman Geisler listed five types of apologetic systems ("Apologetics, Types of," *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], pp. 41–44. Steven B. Cowan edited *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), also suggesting that there are basically five different apologetic methodologies.

example is Stuart Hackett.⁴ His approach is based on two fundamental ingredients: a mind that is latent with “categories” or a structure of thought by which one comes to the world of experience (categories such as quantity, quality, relation, etc.), and data upon which this mental grid can terminate. Thus by using the Kantian rational categories and the pure reasoning powers of the unaided human intellect, Hackett attempts to build a bridge from man to God resting on a purely natural theology apart from the Bible or any presupposition of special divine revelation. As such this methodology is akin to Roman Catholic (Thomistic) philosophy and apologetics and its attempt to prove the existence of God by using the “first principles” or the various “ways” of reasoning (such as from effect to cause to First Cause, etc.). Other evangelicals, without the overt dependence on Kant and Thomas Aquinas, also developed a non-presuppositional approach to apologetics, such as Norman Geisler,⁵ R. C. Sproul,⁶ and John Warwick Montgomery.⁷

A second methodology may be termed semi-rationalism or semi-biblicism. This postulates biblical Christianity and theism as a world view but in turn subjects it to analytical testing and verification by one means or another. The foundational presupposition is first drawn by authority from the Bible but is immediately subjected to rational investigation and analysis to determine and verify if truth has been found after all. The conclusion is that the biblical world view passes all tests with highest honors. This system goes by the name of presuppositionalism but, as will be noted, is not a consistently presuppositional method. It is a blend of a purely rational approach and a purely

⁴Stuart C. Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism* (Chicago: Moody, 1957). See also his *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

⁵Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) and *Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976). See also Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

⁶R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), and R. C. Sproul, et al., *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). This non-presuppositional approach was brought into Protestantism from Roman Catholicism by the Anglican bishop, Joseph Butler, in the eighteenth century, principally in *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), and William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802). Thomas Reid adapted some of the Thomistic “first principles” of Paley and Butler, namely, intelligent design and cause-effect, and forged the natural theology philosophy of Common Sense Realism. This in turn was adapted by many Reformed apologists including Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield of old Princeton Seminary. See George Marsden, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” in *Reckoning with the Past*, ed. D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 221–266.

⁷John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975) and *Faith Founded on Fact* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978).

biblical approach. Hence the terms semi-rationalism or semi-biblicism. This is a modified Aquinas/Butler methodology that was (and still is) quite popular in fundamentalism⁸ and was carried over into the new evangelicalism. It may be called properly, and has so been treated, “the new evangelical view.” The leading proponents of this approach are Carnell,⁹ Bernard Ramm,¹⁰ Carl Henry,¹¹ Clark Pinnock,¹² and Gordon Lewis.¹³ The main precursor of the new evangelical apologetic methodology is Gordon Clark.¹⁴

The third method of apologetics is that of Cornelius Van Til principally, and can be labeled total biblicism or total presuppositionalism.¹⁵ In this methodology the revelation-claims of the Bible are not

⁸As evidenced, for example, by the gospel song, “The Bible stands *every test we give it*, for its author is divine; By grace alone I expect to live it, and *to prove it and make it mine* (italics added).

⁹Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) and *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), among others that will be referred to and analyzed later.

¹⁰Bernard Ramm, *Problems in Christian Apologetics* (Portland, OR: Western Baptist Theological Seminary, 1949), *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), *Types of Apologetic Systems* (Wheaton, IL, Van Kampen, 1953), and *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965).

¹¹Carl F. H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), *The Drift of Western Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), and *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–1983).

¹²Clark H. Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case* (Nutley, NJ: Craig, 1968); *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), chapter 1, “The Pattern of Divine Revelation,” especially pp. 37–52; and *Reason Enough* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980).

¹³Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*.

¹⁴Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); “The Wheaton Lectures,” in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968); *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), among many others. Clark taught philosophy at Wheaton College when some of the early thinkers of the new evangelicalism were there as students. Clark’s philosophy and apologetics underwent a transformation later in his life. Apparently in the 1960s he shifted away from his early self-styled presuppositional position which was actually semi-rational; but his early views seem to have set the pace for the new evangelical apologetics.

¹⁵Among the scores of publications of Cornelius Van Til, probably the most definitive is *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955). This was revised and abridged by the publisher in a second (1963) and third (1979) edition. Others of the Van Tillian methodology are Greg Bahnsen (*Dr. Greg Bahnsen: Always Ready—Directions For Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth [Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media, 1996]); Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998); Jim S. Halsey, *For Such a Time As This: An Introduction to the Reformed Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and

merely hypothetically assumed and later rationally validated, much less arrived at by independent reasoning. Instead, divine authority is accepted unconditionally and wholeheartedly by supernaturally-endowed faith. This system rejects all attempts to independently verify the Christian truth-claims because sinful, rational man has no legitimate canons by which to test God and His revelation. The Christian message is to be accepted on the basis of the authority of the living God, and divine authority ceases to be such when poured through the funnel of creaturely validation or arrived at through purely human cognitive processes. The controlling presupposition in this methodology, for which no greater authorization can be given, is that the one living and true God, eternally existing in self-contained tri-unity, has revealed Himself inerrantly in the self-attesting Scriptures of the Protestant canon. This foundational axiom is drawn from the canon itself, i.e., it is the underlying claim and overt testimony of Scripture to itself and to God the author of the Bible, who is also the source, maker, sustainer, and controller of all things in the universe. Furthermore, without this presupposition, nothing anywhere has an explanation;¹⁶ all is bereft of meaning because the only alternative is sheer, blind, irrational chance as the ground of all being. This points up the fact that all thinking about ultimate reality and a comprehensive world view is in the last analysis circular. No such reasoning is possible without it. The concept of an open universe where genuine novelty, pure contingency, and free-from-God “facts” exist is apostate thinking.

This raises the question of ultimate authority in Christian apologetics. It is plain that the matters of methodology and authority are closely intertwined; the ultimate authority determines and controls an apologetic methodology. It is not over-simplifying things to say that *all* methodologies can be classified in one of two groups, depending on the ultimate or most primitive starting authority. The first includes those who accept the Scriptures as sole authority consistently; the other includes all those who substitute something other than the Bible as ultimate authority. The latter may appeal to authorities such as logic, philosophy, science, or the decrees of the church. At any rate, it all boils down to *human reasoning* in one form or another. In simplest language, ultimate authority in theology and apologetics is either God

Reformed, 1976); John C. Whitcomb, “Contemporary Apologetics and the Christian Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 (Apr–Jun 1977 through Jan–Mar 1978); and Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979).

¹⁶This is known in apologetics as the transcendental method, or reasoning from the impossibility of the contrary.

or man; either the self-contained triune God and His self-attesting witness to a self-identifying Christ in the Scriptures is the final court of appeal, or else man pronounces the final verdict, if only to *verify* the truth-claims of Christianity.

NEW EVANGELICAL APOLOGETICS

The new evangelical apologetic method began as a mediating position between a totally rational and a totally biblical position, i.e., between non-presuppositionalism and consistent presuppositionalism. It went by the name of presuppositionalism but was not consistent in its method. This approach made great concessions to rationalistic thinking with a corresponding discount and/or denial of the noetic effects of sin, i.e., the effects of depravity on the human mind.

Purpose

The purpose of the new evangelical apologetic methodology was essentially twofold: to remove intellectual doubts about the claims of Christianity and in so doing to make way for a free-will choice between faith and unbelief or between Christianity and other religious options. As Carnell put it:

The sole purpose of any skilled refutation...is to prepare the ground so that the seed of the gospel can find good soil. This means that your aim should be twofold: first prayerfully seek to answer intellectual difficulties on the part of the unbeliever; then, when these have been met and the way is open, proceed swiftly with the sowing of the gospel seed. Preach Christ!¹⁷

Carnell understood faith to be a resting of the mind in the sufficiency of the evidences; that unless the debris of doubt, uncertainty, and intellectual objections was removed, saving faith could not operate. In a real sense, the credibility of the Christian message must be demonstrated objectively *before* the simple gospel can be preached. For Carnell the Christian world view must be open to rational investigation before any specific claims from special revelation can be made.¹⁸

Pinnock noted that the aim of apologetics is to strive at "laying the evidence for the Christian gospel before men in an intelligent fashion, so that they can make a meaningful commitment under the convicting

¹⁷"How Every Christian Can Defend His Faith," p. 312.

¹⁸Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), pp. 64–65.

power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹ This is possible because the gospel pleases both the head and the heart. In his view, the good news cannot be presented on the spur of the moment by “spouting proof texts and an appeal to religious excitement in the soul. There is need for more serious regard for the philosophical and factual content of the gospel, so that a bolder and more imaginative witness can be undertaken in this critical hour.”²⁰ He explained further that “the intent of Christian apologetics and evidence is not to coerce people to accept the Christian faith, but to make it possible for them to do so intelligently.”²¹ Like Carnell, Pinnock defined faith as a resting of the heart in the sufficiency of the evidences; it is trusting what you believe to be true based on credible testimony. In this case it is the testimony of evidence that forms the sure basis of faith. Otherwise, he feels, one could believe anything on sheer credulity and gullibility, and this would be intellectual suicide.²²

Clark asserted boldly that every Christian is under obligation to defend the claims of Christianity in the face of consistent rejection.²³ Bernard Ramm understood that apologetics and evidences are not the gospel, “but if a man has a prejudice against the gospel it is the function of apologetics and evidences to remove that prejudice. The value of apologetics and evidences for evangelistic purposes...is too frequently underrated usually on the grounds that people are won by preaching of the Word alone.” For him, it is quite evident that “no man will give the necessary credence to the Word if he has certain mistaken notions and biased opinions about the facts and nature of the Christian religion. Apologetics and Christian evidences cut down these objections to enable the gospel once again to directly confront the consciousness of a man.”²⁴ Buswell, of the non-presuppositionalism camp and somewhat a precursor of the new evangelical apologetics, gave great evangelistic value to rational arguments.

What is the value of the arguments? They have indeed great value. According to the Bible, and according to Christian experience, we know that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use the arguments in the process of producing conviction and conversion. The arguments themselves never

¹⁹*Set Forth Your Case*, p. 3.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 2.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 44. See also pp. 4, 5, 8, and 45 for the purpose of apologetics.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 48, 49.

²³Gordon H. Clark, “How May I Know the Bible Is Inspired?” in *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody, 1963), p. 22. He went further: “Anyone who is unwilling to argue, dispute, and reason is disloyal to his Christian duty” (p. 29).

²⁴*Protestant Christian Evidences*, pp. 15–16.

regenerated anyone but they have been instrumental in the process of evangelism, and this is all that is rightfully claimed for them.²⁵

One of the areas where evidences were hoped to have a strong apologetic value was the search for Noah's ark. The various search teams were constantly thwarted by inclement weather, disagreeable Turkish authorities, and other perennial setbacks. But the teams forged ahead year after year under the optimistic thought that conditions sooner or later would enable them to locate the long lost ark. As one summed it up: "We couldn't stand the strain of Ararat if the winds of unbelief in the authority of God's Holy Word didn't impel us to do all that is possible to confirm its entire trustworthiness."²⁶ Another observed, "Ark hunters say they search to find conclusive proof that the story of Noah, often disputed by non-inerrantists and non Christians, is true. [Ark hunter] Cornuke says the discovery of Noah's ark would help convince some people of the authenticity of the whole Bible, including the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."²⁷ Just how the discovery of the ark would verify the truth-claims and trustworthiness of the whole Bible and the person and work of Christ is anything but clear, but such is the implication of this methodology's purpose.

Foundation

The underlying basis for the new evangelical apologetic methodology is called (erroneously as will be shown) presuppositionalism. The claims of Scripture are assumed as reliable truth-content for initial saving faith. But the presupposition of the Bible as true is in need of objective validation. It is argued that basic assumptions about God and revelation are incapable of formal proof but can be indirectly verified. It is further held that man is capable of conducting a rational investigation into the implications of every basic assumption to determine which is more probably true. If a choice must be made between two antithetical first principles, the advice is to choose the one which when applied to the whole of reality gives the most coherent picture and has the fewest difficulties. Clark makes a strong case for the idea of a presuppositional first principle and its necessity in dealing with God and His eternal truth-claims. However, what he is arguing for is not the

²⁵J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 1:73.

²⁶John Warwick Montgomery, "Arkeology 1971," *Christianity Today*, 7 January 1972, p. 51.

²⁷Louis Moore, "Still Searching For the Lost Ark," *Moody Monthly* (Mar 1989): 33.

presupposition of an inerrant Bible but the governance of the law of contradiction, or simply logic, in constructing a world view.²⁸ The laws of logic become the ultimate and absolute authority in the verification process. “Probability” is the acme of this methodology; it is as high as human reason can go in subjecting God and his revelation-claims to an outside authority. This proposed authority is a standard that is external both to God and man by which to ascertain and/or verify if truth has been found in Scripture after all. Buswell therefore says, “There is no argument known to us which, as an argument, leads to more than a probable (highly probable) conclusion.”²⁹ He adds: “Concluding then the inductive arguments for the existence of God, we hold that these arguments do establish a presumption in favor of faith in the God of the Bible.”³⁰ Henry’s phrasing is that revelational philosophy is “an all-inclusive explanation of reality which answers the most problems and leaves the smallest residue of unsolved problems.”³¹ Likewise, Carnell states: “Let us establish securely the fact that proof for the Christian faith, as proof for any world-view that is worth talking about, cannot rise above rational probability. Probability is that state of coherence in which more evidences can be corralled for a given hypothesis than can be amassed against it.”³² Indeed, probability “is the guide of life.”³³

In the verification scheme, saving faith is defined as a tentative acceptance of and trust in something not initially proven, that needs to be rationally verified or inductively vindicated so that the initial assumption does not turn out to be irrational and baseless. Millard Erickson delineates this clearly.

While the Bible not only states what is true, but also that its content is true, one cannot utilize it as his authority in this latter sense. He must decide on the basis of the evidence whether the claimed revelation is genuine. He is forced to do so on the basis of reason, whether he wishes to or not. In actual practice, all men do this, regardless of how naively or simply it may be done.³⁴

²⁸ *Christian View of Men and Things*, pp. 26–31.

²⁹ *Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 1:72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:100.

³¹ *Remaking the Modern Mind*, p. 237.

³² *Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 113. Carnell tries to demonstrate that probability is not incompatible with subjective moral certainty and assurance (pp. 113–21).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *The New Evangelical Theology* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1968), p. 202.

He also holds that “it is possible to exhibit the truthfulness of the Biblical view by appealing to evidence drawn from the created space-time universe.”³⁵ Erickson goes on to say, quite inconsistently it would appear, that this process is “not in conflict with the Bible’s authoritative function.... It is simply determining whether the Bible is what it claims to be.”³⁶ With this in mind,

Faith,...is for the new evangelicals...a *provisional acceptance* of the world and life view revealed in Scripture. This means that while it cannot be proven antecedently to belief, once one has been willing to take the revelation at face value and consider the *possibility* that it is actually true and is the revealed Word of God, evidence may then be offered to that effect (italics added).³⁷

One must begin with faith, then. Without reliance upon the knowledge of God as revealed in the Bible, at least by a *tentative acceptance*, one would never really come to know Him. Yet faith in the sense of a *provisional acceptance* of something not initially proved need not remain on this level. It can go on to be verified, or at least vindicated, so that the assumption is not irrational (italics added).³⁸

Pinnock is even more tentative about the basis of initial saving faith, at least as far as the existence of God is concerned. For him the reason for the rational arguments is “to test rationally what we already *suspect* and are concerned about” (italics added).³⁹

What then are the bases for verifying the truthfulness of basic assumptions, in this case the provisionally held revelation-claims of God in Scripture? How is this new evangelical “interpretative hypothesis”⁴⁰ validated? What criteria can eventually exonerate Scripture from its probationary status? Carnell would say that the standards are fundamentally two: logical consistency and empirical correspondence to “facts.”⁴¹ Nash expands them to four criteria: consistency, coherence, applicability, and adequacy.⁴²

³⁵Ibid., p. 200.

³⁶Ibid., p. 202.

³⁷Ibid., p.130.

³⁸Ibid., p. 132.

³⁹*Reason Enough*, p. 69.

⁴⁰Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, p. 71.

⁴¹*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, pp. 108–13.

⁴²Ronald H. Nash, *The New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), pp. 116–20.

First, consistency is the application of the law of contradiction (logic) to determine internal self-consistency. This is a negative test for truth in that it does not guarantee truth since the premises may be invalid; but inconsistency does reveal when there is *not* truth. Consistency determines if a system is free from internal self-contradictions. Clark held that all false systems can and must be reduced to rational absurdity through the rigorous use of logic.⁴³ Second, coherence is a use of logic to determine if the would-be revelation sticks together. Clark proposed that logic as a negative test is not enough; logic must also exhibit the internal *consistency* of the Christian revelation-claim, a process he calls axiomatization.⁴⁴ Third, applicability is an empirical test to determine if a world-view claimant is relevant to experience. Such a system must be able to explain experience better and more thoroughly than any other. Fourth, adequacy is also an empirical test to see if the would-be revelation is adequate to all possible experience. These four criteria yield the hypothesis or presumptive first principle, in this case the Bible as a provisional object of faith, which is more probably true vis-a-vis other systems of truth-claims.

Common Ground

Common ground is an area of supposedly neutral fact, objectively accessible to all, by which the claims of Christianity can either be proven or verified. It is essentially trying to meet the opponents of the biblical revelation-claims on their own turf. It must be conceded that the fundamentalist forbears of the new evangelicalism were attached to this principle and thus were not wholly biblical at this point. The great evolution debates and other argumentation were generally attempts to meet and refute evolutionists, liberals, and infidels by their own rules on their own ground. Sermons or lectures by fundamentalists on “Why I Believe in God” or “Why I Believe the Bible Is the Word of God” were simply run-downs of Christian evidences used as independent empirical criteria to bolster, confirm, establish, or verify the Bible’s self-validation. In so doing they inadvertently diluted the integrity of the Christian faith, as does the new evangelical methodology.⁴⁵ Edward John Carnell, more than any other other new evangelical apologist, worked out strategically the use of common ground in his principal

⁴³Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), p. 85.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁵Donald G. Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 143.

writings. It was ever his intent to reach as many people as possible with the Christian message, and he always placed himself in the tradition of the Reformers as against Romanists, liberals, neo-orthodox, cultists, and all other forms of essentially pagan philosophy. In each of his major publications, Carnell sought to find a meaningful and different point of contact with the general culture. It was from this point of common ground that he developed his apologetic, giving a rational presentation of the Christian revelation-claim and defending it against the rational attacks of others. In *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* he appeals to logic or the law of contradiction as such a contact.

As his method entails, Carnell assumes the truth of the biblical witness and proceeds to show that it is not incompatible with the law of contradiction but is actually established by it. Appealing to empiricism, he says, “the true is a quality of that judgment or proposition which, when followed out into the total witness of facts in our experience, does not disappoint our expectations.”⁴⁶ Refracting it a bit, he defines truth *for the Christian* as “correspondence with the mind of God.”⁴⁷ However the empirical definition is actually his working model of the true, as when he says: “When Scripture speaks of truth, it means precisely what the man on the street means. Whether a person listens to a political speech or reads the Bible, he is called upon to judge the sufficiency of the evidences.”⁴⁸ His test for truth here is “systematic consistency,” that is, a set of criteria that checks on internal self-coherence and an external fit with the facts of our experience.⁴⁹ The light of rationality common to all (John 1:9), which Carnell says provides the “univocal point of meeting between God and man,”⁵⁰ puts everyone on a level playing field of ability to engage in reason and provides a valid means of determining truth.

Being confronted with a revelation from God, man is therefore invited to submit it to the test of systematic consistency in order to verify its truth. Carnell advises to “accept that revelation which, when examined, yields a system of thought which is horizontally self-consistent and which vertically fits the facts of history.... Bring on your revelations! Let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of history, and they will deserve a rational man’s assent. A careful

⁴⁶*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 45.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁸Edward John Carnell, *The Case For Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 82.

⁴⁹*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, pp. 60–61.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 63.

examination of the Bible reveals that it passes these stringent examinations *summa cum laude*.⁵¹ He triumphantly concludes: "In this entire system of salvation [in the Bible] there is nothing repulsive to the reason of man; there is nothing impossible, immoral, absurd, nothing inconsistent with the corpus of well-attested truth."⁵² Carnell does not ask anyone to go against his rational instincts. He is confident that the Christian message will survive even the most meticulous scrutiny; the evidences for his message will withstand the most stringent investigation and will provide a secure resting place for faith. Carnell tries to defend the Bible as his governing authority; what he rejects is "the notion that authoritative decree per se, unaccompanied by rational evidences of its authority, can be a basis for faith."⁵³ That is, he wants more than biblical dogmatism; he wants an authority but not a sheer authority worthy of trust in itself.

A second major contribution to apologetics by Carnell was *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion*. In this volume he uses values as the point of contact between the gospel and society. His methodology is again to assume the truthfulness of the Christian message and to verify it with the facts of our experience relative to values. Carnell begins by postulating Christianity as a value-option among other options and proceeds to show how it is the best option of all. He clears the ground of charges against the value of faith vis-a-vis knowledge by showing that we exercise faith every day of our life in that of which we know little or nothing. On the other hand, Christianity *is* knowledge, that which is derived after carefully screening the evidences so that the heart may have an unambiguous place to rest.⁵⁴ He further answers the value-options of pleasure, economic security, pure rationalism, and humanism, among others.⁵⁵ Linking all truth with God and His revelation, the author advises that all pretenses to revelation be tested and scrutinized; that since we use coherence in all other realms, why should it be irrelevant in testing for revelation?⁵⁶ The criterion for testing is values, and these values are administered by what Carnell calls the free (unprejudiced) self or the free man.⁵⁷

⁵¹Ibid., p. 178.

⁵²Ibid., p. 179.

⁵³Ibid., p. 71.

⁵⁴Carnell, *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 29.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 53, 111, 223.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 491.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 64, 155, 164, passim.

Carnell is here appealing for the consistent and honest rational man to consider the values offered by the option of biblical Christianity. Just as he invited others to bring on their revelations, he now invites them in effect to bring on their would-be value-options and he will show that the Christian message makes peace with our highest conceptions of values and theirs do not. Therefore it is in the highest traditions of reason to trust Christ as one's personal Savior and the essence of utter folly not to do so. This is because of the indisputable testimony of the evidences. "Spirit can be led to the God worthy of being worshiped only through the avenue of objectively veracious evidences."⁵⁸ "Jesus Christ is worthy of our faith and consequently ought to receive it because both his person and his doctrine are rationally continuous with the values which we have already accepted in ordinary experience."⁵⁹

In *Christian Commitment* Carnell finds a third point of contact with culture. The common ground here is the "judicial sentiment," a moral oughtness which grows out of what he calls "the moral and spiritual environment." The moral and spiritual environment is an enclosure that includes everyone. It is formed by obligations of a moral and spiritual nature, sometimes called by Carnell "the duties that already hold a person."⁶⁰ This environment is composed of the realities to which men are committed by existence itself. The law of our dignity is an essential part of this environment.⁶¹ If we enter another's presence, he is under moral obligation to respond. Myriads of decisions of a moral and spiritual nature must be made daily because of our inevitable participation in this enclosure. The moral faculties of every person are constantly at work as they move in this moral and spiritual atmosphere. Countless times people are called upon to discharge moral duties, no matter how trivial. These duties are called the claims of the moral and spiritual environment. Morality consists of choices that are freely expressed through the necessities of the moral and spiritual environment.⁶² "Rectitude forms the moral and spiritual environment of an upright heart."⁶³ This is but another way of saying that the person of God comprises this environment, for in Him we live and move and

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 450.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 495.

⁶⁰Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 32.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 56.

⁶²Ibid., p. 66.

⁶³Ibid., p. 39.

have our being.⁶⁴

The judicial sentiment is the moral faculty that judges on the basis given it by the claims of the moral and spiritual environment.⁶⁵ If someone takes advantage of us, is rude, or even inadvertently violates the law of our dignity, the judicial sentiment is aroused and he is judged guilty. He has transgressed the claims of the moral and spiritual environment. He lacks rectitude at that point; justice has been miscarried to some degree at least. From this point Carnell makes an easy transition to God Himself. The judicial sentiment in all people implies and even demands an Administer of justice since the moral and spiritual environment is the basis upon which all judgments are made.⁶⁶ This Administrator must be God; He completes the moral cycle by fulfilling the judicial sentiment.⁶⁷ On this basis Carnell feels he has reasoned from human experience to the person of God, although he acknowledges the Bible as his authority for the fact that in God we live and move and exist.⁶⁸

Extending the argument further, Carnell shows how this approach can help a person find God. Man knows it is morally wrong to be indifferent to those around him who show him favors, yet when it comes to *divine* favors, he not only fails to respond, he does not have the moral capability of changing himself. This is called the *moral predicament*.⁶⁹ What can such a person do in this case? The author suggests that he at least can be transparently honest before God; that while this will not solve the problem, it will provide “a clean moral platform on which to build.”⁷⁰ Since the moral and spiritual environment is common to both God and man, God is obligated to reveal himself when the right moral conditions exist. “God is under the same necessity to extend life to the humble as he is to withhold it from the proud.”⁷¹ So if someone will but humble himself he will discover truth—truth as personal rectitude or uprightness: man as he is corresponding to man as he ought to be.⁷² He will discover truth by moral self-acceptance,

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 92.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 103.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 101.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 129.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 151.

⁷²Ibid., p. 16.

i.e., by consistently submitting himself to the realities that already hold him in the moral and spiritual environment. In other words he will come to God.

The last major contribution to apologetics by Edward John Carnell is *The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life*. In this work he is appealing to the law of love as the point of contact with modern society. He feels that the relationship between patient and analyst in modern psychotherapy can be a basis for an apologetic. He confesses his indebtedness to Freud for the apologetical significance of love.⁷³ In this short volume, Carnell develops the thesis that love is unconditional acceptance. Love is always kind, truthful, and humble without pretense.⁷⁴ What kind of an authority referees the kingdom of love? Carnell says it is the “convictions of the heart.” This seems to be some intuitive sense of good that everyone, especially a happy child, possesses. “These convictions say that a person is good when he is kind and truthful, and that in the end a good person has nothing to fear.... Since happy children are citizens of the kingdom of love, they enjoy an intuitive perception of virtue...[they] discover the meaning of virtue by listening to their own hearts.”⁷⁵

The happy child is used as the paradigm of the intuitions of the heart that form the basis of the book. Whatever a happy child feels in the raw stuff of his heart concerning love, evil, and fair play is the structure of the kingdom of love. The values a happy child takes for granted form the convictions of the heart in the kingdom of love. These convictions distinguish between a good man and an evil one. A good man is kind and truthful; he always does as he would be done to—an axiom in the kingdom of love.⁷⁶ These good people form the decent society which collectively acts as the good man. This society also follows the axiom. The convictions of the heart form the decent society that intuitively knows to condemn lying, cheating, murder, and theft. These persuasions of the society are the same as those which children draw upon to pronounce Cinderella good and her stepmother bad.⁷⁷ Anyone who would attack the best interests of a decent society would immediately be branded as a fraud. All moral improvements in

⁷³Edward John Carnell, *The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 6.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 52, 95, 151.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 149.

society trace to the convictions of the heart.⁷⁸ These convictions of the heart are analogous to faith in God. It is the faith of a child in the outcome of a fairy tale elevated to a much higher proportion. Here the transition is again made to God. Only God can answer, or fulfill, the convictions of the heart.⁷⁹

The pattern here is almost identical to the other works of Carnell. Love is the common denominator between people and God and the common ground between people among themselves. Love flows out of the convictions of the heart. Little children can instinctively perceive virtue, but among adults it is the (consistent) good man and his kind in the decent society that can distinguish virtue from vice. The good man does the testing in the kingdom of love.⁸⁰ The good man thus stands with the upright man, the free man, and the rational man of Carnell's earlier works in verifying truth as man meets God.

Another familiar area of common ground is history, including archaeology. Pinnock argued: "If the Gospel cannot be sustained by historical data, it cannot be sustained at all. Myths and fables may be immune to historical investigation if only because they are in essence a-historical; but the incarnation of the Son of God belongs to the flesh and bone of history." Noting further: "The Gospel is about historical facts. Unless these can be examined and tested, preaching loses its integrity and conviction."⁸¹ Gary Habermas employs the supposed independent testimony of history in *Ancient Evidence For the Life of Jesus*.⁸²

There are several bases or assumptions in the use of common ground. Without this presupposed framework the verification process could not work and the use of common ground would be impotent. Whether or not these assumptions are valid will be dealt with in due course, but if their validity is doubtful or non-existent, the whole methodology will prove to be fundamentally worthless. First, the neutral autonomy of the human mind is assumed in the verification/common ground procedure. It is taken for granted that man's mind is free, independent, and neutral with regard to God or any

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 150.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 105.

⁸⁰In *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, Carnell follows the same thought in the chapter titled "Proof" (pp. 81–91).

⁸¹Clark Pinnock, "Toward A Rational Apologetic Based Upon History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (Summer 1968): 147–48.

⁸²Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984. See the report by Richard John Neuhaus of a debate between Habermas and British atheist, Anthony Flew, on the historicity of the resurrection of Christ ("History and Faith," *National Review* [15 Apr 1988], p. 45). Neuhaus, a Roman Catholic, says Habermas won "hands down."

other “fact.” This is because prejudice to any degree will skew the verification process and will make common ground anything but common. A second assumption is the common rationality of all people. It is assumed that all have or can have common notions of logic, values, morality, love, or the meaning of history. That is, whatever is used as the common ground must have the common thinking of all in the verification process. It is this common rationality that creates an area of common ground that is equally accessible to all and can be a basis of appeal for all.

Third, it is assumed that there is a virtual one-for-one rational continuity between all people and God. Carnell says that John 1:9 (the “light” that lights everyone) is a “univocal point of contact between God and man.”⁸³ In other words, man’s rational nature, his ability to reason, is continuous with God Himself. It gives man the ability to think God’s thoughts after Him. In practicality, this is assuming logic as the common rational bond between God and human beings. Logic means the same thing to God as to man and, if used consistently, is common to all people with each other. Henry understands that “the Christian religion assigns a critical and indispensable role to reason.... Christian theology unreservedly champions reason as an instrument for organizing data and drawing inferences from it, *and as a logical discriminating faculty competent to test religious claims*” (italics added).⁸⁴ The fountain head of this role for logic appears to be Gordon Clark, the mentor of many of the budding new evangelical thinkers while he was teaching philosophy at Wheaton College. Building on the Greek word *logos*, Clark boldly translates John 1:1: “In the beginning was logic, and logic was with God and logic was God.” For him “the law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking.”⁸⁵ Using this deified law, Carnell can exclaim with great triumph: “In this entire system of salvation there is nothing repulsive to the reason of man; there is nothing impossible, immoral, absurd, nothing inconsistent with the corpus of well-attested truth.”⁸⁶ This rational continuity thus becomes the theoretical basis of new evangelicalism’s “dialogues” with heretics and infidels and many other activities that bind Christians and non-Christians together in some kind of fellowship or common cause.

Fourth, the new evangelical methodology of verification and

⁸³*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 63.

⁸⁴*God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:226.

⁸⁵“Wheaton Lectures,” p. 67.

⁸⁶*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 179.

common ground presupposes the brute nature of fact or truth. A fact is brute when it just “is.” In this approach it is assumed that a fact has no necessarily intelligible relationship to other facts (much less to God), and requires no universal for understanding. As such a fact is free-floating, self-explaining, self-fulfilling or self-satisfying, and independent. It is rootless; it stands on its own base and becomes something to which both God and man must conform, that both can appeal to, and can be used by man to prove the existence of God or at least to test and confirm the veraciousness of God’s revelation-claims in Scripture. In the new evangelical proposal, truth is a body of independent, brute fact that derives meaning from itself, is accessible to all, and can be used in proving, confirming, verifying, defending, and even presenting the Christian message.

Empiricism (i.e., sense experience) plays a large role in defining and verifying truth in this methodology. Carnell writes, “The true is a quality of that judgment or proposition which, *when followed out into the total witness of facts of our experience*, does not disappoint our expectations” (italics added).⁸⁷ Or, “while Scripture speaks of truth, it means precisely what the man on the street means. Whether a person listens to a political speech or reads the Bible, he is called upon to judge the sufficiency of the evidences, and if he is reasonably free of prejudice, he will bring the same criteria to the one task that he does to the other.”⁸⁸ Bernard Ramm states that theological study has two foci—one in *experience* and the other in Scripture (italics added).⁸⁹

Defense of the Faith

Edward John Carnell is again probably the most articulate paradigm of the new evangelical apologetic methodology as regards removing the intellectual objections to, and the defense of, the gospel. His series “How Every Christian Can Defend His Faith,” by its very title, encompasses every believer and the method that each believer can utilize in presenting and defending his Christian faith. Two pertinent questions should be kept in mind as this method is analyzed: Is genuine New Testament Christianity being presented and defended? and, Is this something that *every Christian* can do?

Part I of his series deals with the existence of God. Reminding us that “apologetics is simply Christianity defensively stated,” Carnell

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 45.

⁸⁸*Case For Orthodox Theology*, p. 82.

⁸⁹Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 46.

calls attention to its limitations.

The sole purpose of any skilled refutation...is to prepare the ground so that the seed of the gospel can find good soil. This means that your aim should be twofold: first prayerfully seek to answer intellectual difficulties on the part of the unbeliever; then, when these have been met and the way is open, proceed swiftly with the sowing of the gospel seed, Preach Christ!⁹⁰

In answering a “genuinely sincere agnostic,” for example, first “give him a glimpse of the variety and extent of proofs supporting Christianity, by pointing to as many as you can of the many evidences that God exists,” evidences such as archaeological and scientific data, the unity and coherence of the Bible, the uniformity and design of nature, and the like. “If the person is impressed with this evidence, turn at once to the gospel.... If, however, the objector appears unimpressed with the evidences you have listed, leave them and turn to logical reasoning.” The purpose here is “to bring reason to bear on the preconceived convictions of the unbeliever.... It is an attack on the skeptic’s Maginot line so that the infantrymen—the evidences—may gain entrance.”

Part II handles the revelation of God and how to meet various objections to the need for and the idea of divine revelation. In a summary introductory statement, Carnell writes that “the Christian thus should be prepared to defend the fact of revelation, to present the Bible as the very Word of God, and finally to hold it up as a mirror which so clearly reflects the sinfulness of the unbeliever’s heart that he cannot but see his need and cry out to God for saving mercy.”⁹¹ Part III is given over to attacks on the providence of God. Answering an attack on prayer, “the proper approach is to go back to the arguments establishing the existence of God and the reality of revelation. Then return to the question of prayer. When once God and revelation are shown to be reasonable, prayer will become reasonable, too.”⁹² The perennial problem of free will and God’s sovereignty is answered by anecdotal parallels. “We can generally *predict* what a hungry child will do with a chocolate ice cream cone or how a woman with a new hat will act before a mirror. But this does not mean that the acts were not freely done.”⁹³ Since God’s knowledge and ability transcend man’s, the

⁹⁰*Moody Monthly* (Jan 1950): 312.

⁹¹*Moody Monthly* (Feb 1950): 384.

⁹²*Moody Monthly* (Mar 1950): 460.

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 461.

argument is that the tension between sovereignty and freedom thus virtually disappears or is at least made manageable.

The attack against miracles is a little more complicated to meet, but the author is optimistic: “The Christian may be courageous when men try to argue against the possibility of miracles, for the case against miracles is a tissue of fallacies.”⁹⁴ Critics who deny miracles by appealing to a closed universe—i.e., natural law is binding on the entire universe—are answered by the Christian by appealing to an open universe—arguing for the *possibility* of miracles, noting that *history* will confirm their actuality. If the critic then argues that this makes the universe a little too open and thus unpredictable and science impossible, the advice is to assure him that “God has restricted [miracles] to a very small number.”⁹⁵ That is to say, the universe is not *that* open; it is actually a closed system after all, but then again not so closed as to preclude miracles.

A similar tack used by others is to show that miracles are compatible with natural law. Arguing that if a needle will float in a bathtub, it is scientifically possible that the young prophet’s axe head could float in a river (2 Kings 6:6);⁹⁶ or since “lizards and salamanders grow new tails, to make a new hand would not be impossible for God.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, “nature furnishes many...examples [of virgin births—parthenogenesis] on the lower levels of life,”⁹⁸ presumably referring to certain self-pollinating plants and self-fertilizing insects. It is not difficult therefore “to believe in the virgin birth of Christ.”⁹⁹ The scientific criterion for the explanation of a miracle is: “The first thing a scientist should say is that all our laws are ‘probabilities.’ Einstein demonstrated that point effectively. We know, for example, that although each electron behaves differently, the ensemble of electrons is predictable in behavior. *Yet if we have the slightest change in the organization of this activity we have a miracle*” (italics added).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 460.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 461.

⁹⁶“An Interview With Stanley W. Burriss, Gerhard Dirks and Lambert Dolphin, Jr.,” *Decision* (Nov 1966): p. 8.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 9.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 8.

ANALYSIS

The foregoing apologetic methodology was officially sanctioned in the 1960s as the new evangelical approach. With some variation, this was the position espoused by Carl Henry, Bernard Ramm, Clark Pinnock, Millard Erickson, and Ronald Nash, among others, but especially articulated by Edward John Carnell. The leading ideas of this approach seem to be sourced mainly in Gordon H. Clark, the somewhat unofficial, and sometimes acknowledged, mentor of the new evangelical apologetic motif. Clark and his followers called themselves presuppositionalists in that they held to an ultimately primitive starting point in philosophy and apologetics that was self-evident, axiomatic, and not deduced from a prior truth; which presupposition, they said, was the Scriptures. This, however, was not exactly the case because the Scriptures were then verified and defended and the gospel message presented in ways that were inconsistent with the stated axiom. Clark's position could more correctly be identified as presuppositional rationalism. The overall new evangelical position had many more elements of inductivism, empiricism, fideism, and evidentialism than true presuppositionalism.¹⁰¹

In the 1940s and 50s especially, the rival schools of apologetics were chiefly those of Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til, whose viewpoints differed significantly. Both were of the Reformed tradition in theology but differed sharply over the fundamental issues of the depravity of the human intellect, the Creator-creature distinction between God and man, and the ultimate incomprehensibility of God as these doctrines impacted philosophy and apologetics. I became convinced while in seminary in the later 1950s that the Van Til position is the biblical one, and it is from this perspective that the new evangelical apologetic will be criticized. Van Til was part of the original fundamentalist/evangelical coalition, at least in thinking and arguing, although for him the name Reformed or Calvinist stood for the Bible and everything Christian. He did not consider himself a new evangelical; in fact, he was quite critical of the new evangelicalism early on.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹Definitions are probably in order here. *Inductivism* is reasoning from particulars to general conclusions. It starts with independent "facts" as a given and from there constructs degrees of probabilities as proofs, verification, or evidences of Christianity. *Empiricism* appeals to the senses, usually in the form of "the scientific method," in determining truth in the process of proving, verifying, or evidencing Christianity. *Fideism* understands Christian philosophy and apologetics to be purely a matter of faith. Reason and argumentation are considered invalid and thus discounted altogether; one must simply believe. *Evidentialism* focuses mainly on objective, historical evidences supporting, proving, or verifying the truth-claims of Christianity.

¹⁰²Cornelius Van Til, "The New Evangelicalism" (Philadelphia: Westminster

Nash denies that Van Til was a new evangelical.¹⁰³

The new evangelical apologetic methodology is ambivalent in at least three areas.

Ambivalence on Depravity

It is one of the ironies of theology that self-confessed Calvinists could become functional Arminians in apologetics. All the new evangelical apologists claimed to stand in the Reformed tradition on soteriology. But they all demonstrated a colossal inconsistency on the doctrine of total depravity. In theology itself they denied completely any ability of the natural man to respond of his unaided free will to the call of God to salvation, much less to initiate some kind of overture to God in the first place. There was no patience with the Pelagian idea of the natural ability of the unsaved or with the Arminian concept of prevenient grace, i.e., enough redemptive grace is given to all the unsaved to offset the depravity of the will so that a truly uninhibited free choice could be made for or against Christ by means of this volitional equilibrium. They were far too Calvinistic for those notions. But in philosophy and apologetics the effects of depravity on the human intellect, called noetic sin, were either denied or greatly deprecated. Gordon Clark (rightly) criticized Abraham Kuyper for thinking that “the universal human consciousness is always able to overcome this sluggishness [i.e., noetic sin] and to correct mistakes in reasoning.” But Clark himself could only rejoin rather weakly: “Perhaps the human consciousness is not always able to overcome sluggishness and correct mistakes in reasoning.”¹⁰⁴ However his own rationalistic apologetic methodology seems to assume that the natural man can indeed override his cerebral “sluggishness,” at least to the extent that he can test conflicting first principles and revelation-claims by the law of contradiction to see which gives the most coherent picture of the world.¹⁰⁵ Carnell disliked the “vague homilies on the ‘noetic effects of sin’” and found depravity to reside primarily in the affections. Sin touches the mind only as it is made the servant of the affections.¹⁰⁶ “Although we cannot make ourselves righteous, we can be sorry for our want of

Seminary, 1960, 76 pp., unpublished).

¹⁰³*New Evangelicalism*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁴Gordon H. Clark, “The Bible As Truth,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (Apr 1957): 161.

¹⁰⁵*Christian View of Men and Things*, pp. 32–34.

¹⁰⁶*Christian Commitment*, p. 198.

rectitude. We *are* capable of humbling ourselves before God and our neighbor.”¹⁰⁷ “God only asks humility, and humility is within the reach of one who feels even the faintest stirring of guilt in his heart.”¹⁰⁸ “It can be argued with equal plausibility that not only are we obliged by the law of love, but that in a very meaningful sense we are natively capable of meeting it.”¹⁰⁹ Carnell’s concept of depravity here is extremely shallow.

Dewey Beegle, while not an apologist *per se*, was doing apologetics concerning inerrancy and reason by saying, “the human mind does not create the evidence which is determinative in the separation of truth from error. All human reason can do is *to function properly* with the data that are furnished it” (italics added).¹¹⁰ The problem here is that the human mind cannot “function properly” with the data because of the innate effects of noetic sin. Granted, Beegle is an Arminian, and one would expect his view of total inability to be anything but total, but this only points up again the new evangelical methodology’s problem of sounding exactly like Arminianism. Erickson’s idea of depravity is profoundly weak: “The Bible pictures man prior to conversion as being in some sense ‘dead.’... He does not care about spiritual considerations, at least not very greatly.”¹¹¹ The biblical picture of the natural man, to be demonstrated in short order, is one of hatred and active hostility against “spiritual considerations,” and not a bland “I don’t care very much about them.”

The mind of the natural man is not neutrally autonomous; it is totally depraved. He does not accept or welcome¹¹² spiritual things from God. He is unable to do so because he regards them as foolishness (1 Cor 2:14). The mind of the unbelieving is defiled (Titus 1:15). The fleshly, unsaved mind is “hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*” (Rom 8:7).¹¹³ Before conversion the person was “indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind” (Eph 2:3). Unbelieving Gentiles, and by legitimate extension all unbelievers everywhere, live in the “futility of their

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 200.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 240.

¹¹⁰Dewey M. Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 63–64.

¹¹¹*New Evangelical Theology*, p. 113.

¹¹²BAGD, s.v. “δέχομαι,” p. 177, lists “receive as a guest, welcome” as a general meaning.

¹¹³All Scripture quotations are from the NASB, 1995 update.

mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God" (Eph 4:17–18). The thoughts of the wicked are, "There is no God" (Ps 10:4; i.e., God is irrelevant). No one among the sons of men of his unaided mental energies "understands" God in the sense of seeking Him, doing good, and integrating Him into their world view (Ps 14:2–3; Rom 3:10–12). Sin has affected the whole of man's being; "from the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it" (Isa 1:6). The unsaved person is completely destitute of the unconditional love for God which He requires (Matt 22:37–38). He who is being asked to choose between conflicting first principles for the one with the most coherent world view has *already* formed a world view with himself at the very center. Of all the pictures or symbols depicting the natural man with reference to the absolute claims of God on him, the most poignant is the figure of death. He is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1), totally unresponsive to God, as completely unable to humble himself as he is to lift himself up to the streets of gold. If he is to have any relief epistemologically, intellectually, volitionally, or in any manner, there must be a unilateral work of divine grace that elicits a response of repentance and faith. The dead must be acted upon by being given life before any right response is possible.

Man's rational continuity with God has been disrupted and distorted by the curse of original sin and its noetic effects. He can think but he cannot think God's thoughts after Him without regenerating grace. He can only sin in varying degrees. He has not lost his mind; he has lost his holiness. He does not lack information; he lacks regeneration. The natural man has a totally contradictory rational/irrational standard by which he judges and evaluates everything.¹¹⁴ Which aspect of the standard he uses is determined by his sinful nature and his compulsion to suppress the truth he already knows in his heart about God, sin, judgment, and the like (Rom 1:18–32). This congenital ambivalence systematically rejects offensive truth. The nearer the natural man comes to his need for God for whatever reason, the more energetically he will pursue this hypocritical inconsistency. Therefore, to try and meet the natural man on some kind of neutral, mutually agreeable common ground is impossible. It will only end in the believer frustratingly declaring that his opponent is hopelessly prejudiced against God. But the apologist who understands the noetic effects of sin already knows that the unbeliever is not only self-contradictory and prejudiced, but on his apostate principles is unable to account for any datum in the universe. This is to say nothing of the folly of asking such a one to judge or verify the cogency of the truth-claims of the

¹¹⁴Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p. 237.

Incarnation of Truth Himself. Even a Christian cannot conduct a totally unbiased verification process because he too has a sinful nature that vitiates the full implications of truth. Thus *no one* is able completely and honestly to verify the Christian revelation-claims. The only way out of the dilemma is to presuppose that the one living and true God, eternally existing in self-sufficient tri-unity, has revealed Himself inerrantly in the self-attesting Scriptures of the Protestant canon. And this axiomatic first principle is a product only of sovereign divine grace.

Ambivalence on Truth, Fact, and the Acquisition of Knowledge

Truth and fact are here considered as synonymous. Theologically, truth in God means that He is eternally self-consistent. His knowledge of Himself eternally conforms to His being. His knowledge and being are in perfect, absolute, and eternal correspondence. God exhaustively knows who He is and He is exactly who He knows Himself to be. This is more than divine self-consciousness but includes His decrees, purposes, motives, actions, and attitudes. Truth is not something arbitrary with God; it is not the product of His will. It is a matter of His being and knowledge in complete and everlasting self-coherence. Truth is constitutional with God. The Father is the “God of truth” (Ps 31:5), and He cannot lie (Heb 6:18). Christ is the truth (John 14:6), and the Holy Spirit is the truth (1 John 5:7). Truth, then, is that which corresponds with the mind of God. It is a propositional expression from God, that which God could state about any and all reality.

Truth is more than just that which corresponds to reality, since that implies that somehow truth is not a part of reality or that reality is some kind of an eternalized first principle that gives existence to truth—both of which omit the One who is Truth Himself. The mind of God is the ultimate truth for every fact, proposition, person, event, circumstance, or exchange of energy in the universe since God alone has willed, created, sustains, and controls them either directly or indirectly. God knows exhaustively who He is and what He has willed; thus He alone determines truth for Himself and for all rational creatures external to Himself. Human beings can know truth as they think God’s thoughts after Him. This means that truth for man must consist of or correspond with the truth-propositions of God’s revelation in Scripture.

There are many properties of truth. For one, truth is intellectual; it is always the product of an intellect or mind. Otherwise it is a meaningless abstraction. By the same token, truth is propositional; it is subject and predicate material—concepts, ideas, and information. Propositions are the only material a rational mind can process and use.

Non-propositional thought is an oxymoron that is totally self-destructive, to say nothing of its apostate presuppositions. Propositional discourse must be employed in any attempt to deny propositional discourse; it is axiomatic. Truth, then, is a character of propositions that correctly represents a state of affairs. Truth is one coherent system; it is a unity of interlocking propositions. And this unity is infinite in scope because its source is God. Each truth is related to every other truth, and all is related to God. The truth is the whole; it is one and personal, and infinitely interlocking. Therefore God is essential to *any* truth and thus to *all* truth. If He can be omitted from one truth, He can be dispensed with from every truth. A “moral” truth (“theft is sin”) stands in the same objective sense as a “historical” truth (“Christ was born in the days of Augustus Caesar”). Without the self-contained tri-personal God, neither would have any meaning. There would be nothing but eternal chance, chaos, and impersonal flux. What is more, truth as a systematic unity is only set forth in Scripture. Not all truth is found in the Bible or what can be deduced from the Bible, but the Bible is the only sure foundation for a unified system of truth. Only the inerrant Scriptures testify authoritatively to the infinite God of truth and His exhaustively pervasive relations with the universe. There is no free-from-God or free-from-Scripture truth.

In this setting, then, facts are what they are because of their relationship to God. They take on meaning by virtue of their interpretation by the triune God, i.e., their place in the eternal counsel of the sovereign God as well as their place in the temporal order which only He created, sustains, and controls. All facts are theistic facts; they find definition and “factuality” solely at the pleasure of the God of the Bible and His determination of whatsoever comes to pass. Christ’s self-assertion, “I am the truth” (John 14:6), a claim found in one form or another in all of Scripture, declares that “all reality is created reality, that is, that the facts are what they are by virtue of the Word, who was ‘in the beginning,’ and that consequently they cannot be understood in terms of themselves, but must be seen in the light of the authoritative interpretation which the Word has given.”¹¹⁵ In other words, the relation of one fact to another and to all facts, which gives meaning to any fact, can be known only on the basis that these relationships are exhaustively known by the omniscient God of Scripture. He knows them because He has willed these relations in His eternal counsel, and He has revealed these matters in the inerrant Scriptures. Facts and truth can be rightly comprehended only by those capable of understanding

¹¹⁵Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Review of Dewey M. Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 26 (May 1964): 236.

God and His revelation. The unsaved may indeed make truth statements and retain factual propositions in their thinking, but they do so on principles inconsistent with their apostate free-from-God world view. They have unwittingly plagiarized truth/fact from Christian theism and mouthed it in a certain way, sometimes even using conventional God-talk. But they cannot knowingly affirm truth as genuine truth without the scriptural world view that only comes through a regenerated mind. God must be included and is necessary for the correct interpretation, i.e., truthfulness, of any so-called fact. He is the Ultimate Fact and Reality. Christ Himself indicated as much when He said, "If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God" (John 7:17), and, "you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). And this brings us back again to John 14:6—the very enfleshment of truth is the self-identifying Christ of the infallible, self-authenticating Scripture of the Protestant canon. There is no free-from-Christ or free-from-Scripture truth.

The new evangelical thinking, on the other hand, posits Christ and His revelation as facts among other facts, a truth-option among other options, although perhaps the best option and the facts with the fewest difficulties. The Scriptures present Him as *the* truth and the *only* option if man would ever know truth. In order to avoid the charge of circular reasoning, the new evangelical methodology speaks of a body of facts as if it were something independent, free-from-God, and objective to both God and man, and objective to all mankind with one another. This is unbiblical, as we have seen, as well as self-destructive. The new evangelical apologist knows that no fact or truth is free-from-God, he knows that God planned, made, upholds, and directs the movement of the entire universe; in other words, he knows from theology who God is and His all-pervasive relations with the universe. He should also know that in apologetics when he appeals to a stockpile of supposedly generic facts, he is actually appealing to God-created facts to prove or verify the existence of God and His revelation-claims; i.e., he too is reasoning in a circle. This methodology is confusing, self-defeating, and utterly futile.

One must reason from God to God-given and thus God-interpreted facts. If this is denied, the only alternative is to reason from autonomous man to brute facts that derive meaning from themselves and necessarily extracted by human interpretation.¹¹⁶ This creates a

¹¹⁶This extraction of meaning from brute facts is technically impossible since the so-called facts have no self-included universals to make the particulars intelligible. In other words, there is no intelligible relationship between one particular fact to another in this free-from-God system. Everything arises out of an ocean of chance,

basketful of temporal rational probabilities from which one then must make an irrational “leap” to the eternal God. But there is no direct line in theology, apologetics, or logic from any number of finite effects to an Infinite First Cause.¹¹⁷ New evangelical apologists, of course, would be extremely loathe to admit anything so crass as an irrational leap to God. After all, in that system, apologetics is the handmaiden to faith and the arguments are designed to make faith intelligent. But a closer look reveals that the system actually falls quite short of fostering the certainty of faith in the only God there is and in the eternal trustworthiness of his self-revelation in Scripture. Clark, for example, makes a very telling admission almost off-handedly.

If, nonetheless, it can be shown that the Bible, in spite of having been written by more than thirty-five authors over a period of fifteen hundred years, is logically consistent, then the unbeliever would have to regard it as a most remarkable accident. It seems *more likely* that a single superintending mind could produce this result than that it just happened accidentally. Logical consistency therefore is evidence of inspiration; but it is not demonstration. *Strange accidents do indeed occur, and no proof is forthcoming that the Bible is not such an accident. Unlikely perhaps, but still possible* (italics added).¹¹⁸

Elsewhere Clark appealed to an open universe where anything can happen. Concerning the virgin birth of Christ, he wrote: “Indeed, what with all sorts of biological surprises, a virgin birth seems even less impossible than the incarnation of Deity in human flesh.”¹¹⁹

It appears to me that Clark has bet the apologetic farm at this

contingency, and pure possibility—anything but the sovereign control of the God of Scripture. Any assignment of meaning to this blob of “facts” only betrays a prior commitment to an ultimate point of reference of some kind, which of course invites the rejoinder of circular reasoning. This again illustrates the necessity of the biblical presuppositionalist’s first principle that the one living and true God, existing in self-sufficient tri-unity, has authoritatively revealed Himself in the self-authorizing Bible. Without this, nothing is intelligible; any reasoning to the contrary ends in nihilism.

¹¹⁷Carl Henry, for one, shows his ambivalence on this point. On the one hand he knows that “if one approached the cosmos on non-theistic premises, he was not driven by the evidence to a theistic conclusion” (*Remaking the Modern Mind*, p. 231). On the other hand, Henry wants to use empirical, essentially non-theistic, conclusions or “facts” to verify the Christian revelation-claims. But he simply can’t have it both ways without the charge of reasoning in a circle. If non-theistic thought cannot produce theistic conclusions, neither can non-theistic “facts” based on non-theistic premises *verify* theistic truth-claims.

¹¹⁸“Can I Trust My Bible?” p. 24

¹¹⁹Gordon H. Clark, “Incarnation: Fact or Theory?” *Christianity Today*, 10 December 1956, p. 5.

point—and lost. He has asked the unbeliever to leap into an ocean of pure contingency, to stake his eternal destiny on what may prove to be a “strange accident,” and to entertain the possibility that the very foundation of atonement may turn out to be no more than a “biological surprise.” Clark has simply told the natural man what he has told himself repeatedly, i.e., that the Bible and the person of Jesus Christ may possibly be the products of chance historical anomalies, and that God Himself may actually be irrelevant after all. This is the problem with engaging in probabilities. The high probability that God exists and His Word true has the correlate *possibility* that He might not exist and His Word might not be not wholly true. Is this making the content of saving faith more intelligible?

Carnell had his “penumbral zone,” essentially a bin of agnosticism, mystery, and enigma where the shortcomings of evidences, probabilities, and accidents were thrown. He wrote:

Revelation is fragmentary. “The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Whenever a systematic theologian becomes too systematic, he ends up falsifying some aspect of revelation. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to coax all the data of Scripture into neat harmony. One must preserve a penumbral zone in his theology; new exegetical possibilities should be welcomed. “Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Corinthians 13:12).¹²⁰

It is true that God and His relations with the universe are at bottom incomprehensible; they cannot be fully known by a finite mind. But that is not what Carnell seems to be referring to. He means that the high probability of evidences for truth in apologetics carries its contrary, i.e., that it is also possible, though remote and highly unlikely, for the whole evidentialist/verificationist scheme to collapse in skepticism and worse. Using history as the common ground, Carnell maintains that the raising of Lazarus is of the raw stuff of history theoretically open to the same verification as anything historical. But he knows that the miracle of Lazarus is of course impossible to verify by empirical means. This empirical lack is therefore deposited in the penumbral bin.

Since Christian evidences do not form an airtight system that compels belief, one is forced to choose between conflicting truth-claims. As such, the evidences for the historicity, affirmations, and demands of Christianity all fall short of actual, formal proof, attaining

¹²⁰*Christian Commitment*, p. 285.

only degrees of probability, and one must still accept the claims of Christ by faith as revealed in the testimony of a self-authenticating Bible. This evidentialist/probability shortfall is put by Carnell into the penumbral zone. But, like Clark, he seems also to make faith another irrational leap into uncertainty.

Clark and Carnell would both have been better advised to follow their Reformed theological instincts and call for sovereign supernatural grace (i.e., divine illumination) to implant an intuitive certainty of Scripture's truthfulness as a sure basis for divinely-endowed faith. In so doing they could have forgotten altogether about "accidents," "surprises," and "penumbra," and had an apologetic methodology informed by exegetical theology rather than logic and experience. They would also have had a fully consistent, biblical presuppositionalism, and the irrational "leap" would have been eliminated.

In the 1940s there was an open controversy between Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til over the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God.¹²¹ The dispute directly impacted how one can know God and His revelation (i.e., epistemology). Clark taught that there is a direct identity between what God knows and what man knows if both know the same thing. Van Til's position was that nothing exists in man as it exists in God; therefore man's knowledge is indirect, an "image" or a mirror of God's knowledge. Clark was charged by Van Til with denying God's ultimate incomprehensibility and Clark's rejoinder was that Van Til's position made for skepticism about any knowledge of God.

The options in the relation between God's knowledge and man's are three. One is univocal (one identical meaning): knowledge is the same for God and man; there is an identity in content and understanding. Another is equivocal (two or more meanings): there is no point of contact between God's knowledge and man's. The third is analogical (similar but not identical meaning): man's knowledge replicates God's knowledge because nothing exists in man exactly as it exists in God. The Clarkite camp held to the first and the Van Tillian to the third. Neither would give place to the second option—equivocalism—which is the thread-bare neo-orthodox view that God is the "wholly other," thus ultimately totally unknown and unknowable.

¹²¹Cornelius Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Rippon, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967), pp. 62–72; John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), pp. 97–113; Bradley J. Swygard, "The Basis For the Doctrine of the Incomprehensibility of God in Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991).

Equivocalism is an old Platonic, gnostic notion that the realm of deity is so transcendent that God (or the gods) and man never meet on any physical or metaphysical level. The two realms never truly intersect; at best they only “touch” as on a tangent. Theism becomes an open pantheon—“whatever gods may be,” in Henley’s awful words in “The Invictus.” Equivocalism is simply a provincial brew of the Unknown God, the godless “ignorance” of the ancient Athenians (Acts 17:23). The realm of God or the gods is unknown and ultimately unknowable by human beings; it is an area that is totally enveloped in the fog of impenetrable mystery in the last analysis. It is completely apostate and thus stringently opposed by any Bible-believing thought.

The option of univocalism presupposes something outside of and above God to which He and man are both bound; i.e., some common point of reference. Carnell, for example, is thinking univocally when he says: “To be sure, we do not understand everything God has revealed in Scripture, but that is not to admit that the obscure parts are intrinsically irrational; rather it simply means that we have not studied them long enough. *Time and illumination alone stop us from understanding the entire revelation of God*” (italics added).¹²² This elevates the human mind to deity because both God and man are bound to the same dictate or referent; both share the same continuum of Eternal Universal Reason (or “reason in general”). The difference is only a matter of degree. At this univocal point man can comprehend God’s mind if only he had enough time. This certainly seems to be a clear denial of God’s ultimate incomprehensibility and a blurring of the line between the Creator and the creature. This is but another form of the human intellectual arrogance that is the sworn enemy of God and His truth-claims and of a truly biblical apologetic methodology. It is not too difficult to see that the new evangelical evidentialist and verificationist apologetics has laid the groundwork for what became a denial of the inerrancy of Scripture by those who wanted the inductive “phenomena” or “facts” to control the doctrine. This resulted in the bifurcation of the Bible into “revelational” and “non-revelational” verses, truth and error, and the search for the “canon within the canon” of Scripture—all governed and directed by human intellectual autonomy.

The option of analogy as developed by Van Til¹²³ is modeled after

¹²²*Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 195.

¹²³This principle has often been confused, unwittingly or otherwise, with the principle of analogy put forth by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. For the difference explained, see Gilbert B. Weaver, “Man: Analogue of God,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), pp. 321–27.

the creation of man in the image of God. Man is in some sense analogous to God because of creation. He is an analogue of God in thinking, willing, being, and doing. He is a finite replica of God in certain areas, although he does not participate in the eternal divine essence or being of God. Man cannot cross the Creator-creature line of distinction but he can and does image on a finite level the Creator's level. Nothing exists in man precisely as it does in God; no attribute of God is truly communicable. "Analogy" might better be termed "image relationship," "reflection," or "likeness." In man's thinking process he reconstructs a finite replica, as it were, of God's knowledge.¹²⁴ Weaver suggests "image-like" for the relationship of analogy, likening it to seeing oneself in a mirror—a "mirroring."¹²⁵ "To say that God is incomprehensible is to say our knowledge is never equivalent to God's own knowledge, that we never know Him precisely as He knows Himself."¹²⁶ That is, there is no identity of *content*. Man must rethink/reinterpret God's knowledge of anything. However, *man* does the rethinking; the thoughts are still his, not God's. Man can have truth because he has been created as a self-conscious reinterpreter of God's knowledge of truth. To that extent there can be "an identity of meaning between God's words and man's, at least on those occasions when God uses human language."¹²⁷ This is true even though technically there cannot be an identity of content. "The Analogy does not mean that man cannot know the same truth that God knows. [It] means that the subjective comprehension man has of a given truth is not identical to that which God has of the same truth."¹²⁸ This knowledge by analogy is valid knowledge, just as a free act of man is valid even though it is at the same time the conscious object of God's all-encompassing decree of whatsoever comes to pass. Man's actions have genuine significance; they are not a charade. Repentance and faith, for another example, are both gifts from God, yet it is man, not God, that repents and believes. Man's repentance and faith are valid and are truly *his* even though they are grants from God; so with the two-level idea of truth and its knowledge.¹²⁹ "Human reason is not a simple linear

¹²⁴Halsey, *For Such a Time As This*, p. 50.

¹²⁵Gilbert B. Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christian Apologist," in *The Philosophy of Gordon Clark*, ed. Ronald Nash (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), p. 304.

¹²⁶John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), p. 21.

¹²⁷John Frame, *Van Til the Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim, 1976), p. 22.

¹²⁸Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christian Apologist," p. 304.

extension of divine reasoning.”¹³⁰

The principle of analogy is the only thing that can save truth and knowledge from skepticism. God *can* be known; truth *can* be known. Man does not need to know everything in order to know something, because God *does* know everything and man’s limited knowledge is held with reference to God’s exhaustive knowledge. There must be comprehensive knowledge somewhere if there is to be true knowledge anywhere. There must be a One to make the Many data intelligible. There has to be unity or else one must yield to the despair of sheer diversity in the last analysis. Thankfully, no one really yields to total despair in the problem of the one and the many. (The particulars of mathematics, for example, are given meaning by the universals of theorems, axioms, et al. The particulars of the alphabet are given validity by the universals of spelling and word formation. Words convey truth by means of grammar, and syntax.) For the Christian apologist the temporal one and many—universals and particulars—are intelligible and valid because they are created by, and interpreted by, the Eternal One and Many—the self-sufficient triune God of the inerrant Bible. He is eternally Three persons in One essence. On this basis, God’s image-bearers can think God’s thoughts after Him and have valid truth and knowledge.

The principle of analogy also reflects and preserves the biblical Creator-creature distinction. The preservation of this distinction upholds the very definition and essence of sin, which is to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). Sin intrinsically is self-made autonomy in an effort to destroy the Creator-creature relationship. In apologetics the big sin is intellectual autonomy. Man endemically refuses to rethink or reinterpret God’s thoughts and interpretation of things as controlled by His written revelation. When the Christian apologist attempts to cross this line of distinction, as Clark and Carnell did in epistemology, he can rightly be charged with destroying the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. At the door of this assumption of intellectual independence, however minimal it may appear to be, can ultimately be laid all the deviations from Scripture that cursed new evangelical thought throughout the decades. And this brings the discussion to the matter of authority.

¹²⁹Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), pp. 27–28. See also Weaver, “Man: Analogue of God,” p. 325.

¹³⁰Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 28.

Ambivalence on Authority

It is plainly admitted by some new evangelicals that there are two authorities in theology and apologetics—the Bible and human reason. Others, not being so bold, tacitly admit the same by using the empirical process of verifying the Bible's authenticity and truth-claims in order to be certain that provisional faith was not irrationally founded. Verification presupposes some sort of independent criteria by which to test divine authority—call this logic, systematic consistency, coherence, applicability, adequacy, or whatever. But without the governance of this outside authority, the new evangelical apologists would face the dreaded charge of circular reasoning—of proving the Bible from the Bible. What, then, is the ultimate religious authority for them? It appears clearly to be the authority of the independent criteria, rational and/or empirical, to which the Bible is subjected to determine its consistency, coherence, and truthfulness. This testing/verifying process then dictates whether the Scriptures can be affirmed or rejected by thinking people. If the Bible is tested by certain criteria to determine and/or verify its truthfulness, then man is the ultimate authority. In this system, one reasons from man to God. This assumes that reason, logic, facts, et al., are prior to and apart from God and His revelation, or again face the charge of circular reasoning—proving God and revelation from God and revelation. In this scheme the Bible has authority only because it rests on the prior approval of whatever is used to verify it.

Erickson wrote:

While the new evangelicals do not use the terms, it might be appropriate to refer to the Bible as *legislative authority*, and to reason as *the judicial authority*.... While the Bible not only states what is true, but also that its content is true, one cannot utilize it as his authority in the latter sense. He must decide on the basis of the evidence whether the claimed revelation is genuine. He is forced to do so on the basis of reason, whether he wishes to or not. In actual practice, all men do this, regardless of how naively or simply it may be done.¹³¹

It is no doubt true that Erickson, as an evangelical theologian, wishes not to hold to the *equal strength* of these two authorities and would probably make reason subordinate to Scripture. But the distinction between legislative and judicial authority is actually of no consequence and thus irrelevant. In his configuration there are still two *rival* authorities—Scripture and reason; and in his apologetic methodology, Scripture is actually subordinated to reason to verify its truthfulness

¹³¹*New Evangelical Theology*, pp. 201–202.

and authority. The Bible is thereby denied the supreme and exclusive authority it claims for itself. Two or more authorities result in no ultimate authority.

Stephen Davis, a professing evangelical who believes there are errors in Scripture, is quite lucid in his concept of more than one authority. Facing the problems of an errant Bible possessing authority, or on what authority can one accept some portions of the Bible and reject others, he concludes: "It is true that no Christian who believes that the Bible errs can hold that the Bible *alone* is his authority for faith and practice. He must hold to some other authority or criterion as well. That authority, I am not embarrassed to say, is his own mind, his own ability to reason." "Reason has a critical function to play in *all* beliefs, religious as well as non-religious. Reason must help determine what the Bible says and, ultimately, whether or not what it says is acceptable." "It is quite true that the notion of 'good reason' is imprecise and flexible. It does not constitute an infallible criterion for what is and is not to be accepted in Scripture. This much I admit."¹³² Although I personally would deny to Davis the label evangelical, and would dismiss his non-inerrantist views as so much intellectual sophistry, the truth is that he is recognized as an evangelical, and his view of human reason as an authority is a logical extension of his non-presuppositional approach to theology and apologetics.

Ramm forthrightly stated that "we define theology as the task of setting forth the claims of our knowledge of God, the verification of these claims, and the systematic and organic connections of our theological knowledge. Theological study has, however, two foci, one in experience and one in Scripture."¹³³ This has the sound of equivocation, if not more, as does the title of his treatise on biblical authority—*The Pattern of Religious Authority*. Authority consists of a pattern, a mosaic, or a multi-faceted grid.¹³⁴ He says,

The authority of God, of Jesus Christ, of Sacred Scripture, and of truth must be properly related, as well as proper regard given for human personality and freedom. The result will be a mosaic of authority, with the central piece being the principle of authority.... One could even speak of a chain of authority with the principle of authority being the first and most important link.¹³⁵

¹³²Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 71, 117, 126.

¹³³*Christian View of Science and Scripture*, p. 46.

¹³⁴For an extensive analysis of *The Pattern of Religious Authority*, see Van Til, "New Evangelicalism," pp. 13–22.

¹³⁵Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

He notes: “We must be most demanding in our process of differentiating the voice of God from the voice of man.... That God may have spoken is also a genuine option, and *prejudice* of no species must blind the eye of the searcher to this possibility.”¹³⁶ Thus the Bible as a word from God is a “genuine option” and a “possibility” that may be worthy of the efforts of an unprejudiced searcher. This in turn sets up the need for an authority other than the Bible itself. The Bible cannot be a sole authority because Ramm rejects the idea of a “sheer appeal to authority” or the “exclusive claims to authority.” “Principles of religious authority founded on a bare monistic principle soon founder.” He wants “to steer a wise course between subjectivism and authoritarianism.”¹³⁷ But in this mixture of the Bible and human experience, the exclusive truth-claims of Scripture can never be set over against the claims of non-Christian thought. The Bible is made to share in a mosaic or chain of authority, even though it may be the centerpiece of the mosaic and the main link in the chain. Apologetics, in effect, becomes a quibble over *how much* authority the Bible is allowed to have. And in this the evangelical apologist has nothing new to say to the natural man or to anyone operating on sub-Christian, non-Christian, or pagan principles. The absolute authority the Bible claims for itself has degenerated into an interminable hassle over degrees of authority, and true biblical authority ends up bearing little or no weight.

Clark elevated logic virtually to a place of deity by understanding John 1:1 to mean “in the beginning was logic, and logic was with God, and logic was God.” Logic is eternal and ultimate; “the law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking.”¹³⁸ Carnell, following Clark, said: “The foundation of all meaning is the law of contradiction.”¹³⁹ “The only demonstration of any absolute is this: Without the presupposition of its [the law of contradiction’s] existence nothing else has meaning—not even the denial of that absolute.”¹⁴⁰ Carnell, as noted earlier, clothed logic in the terms of systematic consistency and coherence. Nash added adequacy and applicability as further refinements. In other words, each of these terms is simply another name in the nomenclature

1957), p. 18.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 16.

¹³⁷Ibid., pp. 18–19.

¹³⁸Clark, “Wheaton Lectures,” p. 67.

¹³⁹*Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, p. 184.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 186.

for the law of contradiction. But is this law eternal? Is it ultimate? Does it belong to the realm of the Creator or the creature?

To say that logic as used by humans is simply God's thinking process is to break the Creator-creature distinction that is fundamental to the Scriptures, theology, philosophy, and apologetics. In truth, logic belongs to the realm of the created; it is creaturely in essence. It is an aspect of the image of God in man which, among other things, is rational. Creaturely rationality is patterned after God's all-encompassing rationality. Since nothing exists in man exactly as it does in God and no divine attribute is truly communicable, the law of contradiction rests on the inherent order that exists in the tri-personal God. God is exhaustively and eternally self-coherent, and He has endowed His image bearers with the ability to reason coherently on the temporal level. Since God is truth and cannot lie (Ps 31:5; Heb 6:8), "logical laws are elaborations upon the fact that God does not contradict Himself."¹⁴¹ "Christianity holds that God existed alone before any time existence was brought forth. He existed as the self-conscious and self-consistent being. The law of contradiction, therefore, as we know it, is but the expression on a created level of the internal coherence of God's nature."¹⁴² Logic is valid and necessary for communication on the creaturely level. Human language itself is univocal; it is predicated on the law of contradiction. Proposition A cannot be non-A at the same time and in the same sense. Presuppositional apologetics does not deny the validity of this law. It is constitutional with human beings. It is universal and unchangeable on the human plane. It is not the validity of the law but its *use* that is the point at issue in apologetics. The law of contradiction makes no sense outside of the Christian world view and the primacy of the counsel of the self-sufficient triune God. Logic is not God but presupposes the God and Father of the self-identifying Christ of Scripture, which is the most primitive and ultimate first principle of human predication in Christian apologetics and philosophy. The Clark-Carnell proposal is presuppositional in name only; all it presupposes is some kind of a self-referential first principle. In this case it presupposes logic as an absolute to which God Himself must conform. Rather than predicating logic on the person of God, it is used to test and verify God and His truth-claims, an obliteration of the Creator-creature distinction. Van Til asks: "Why did [Carnell] not tell us that the laws of logic must rest upon the order that God has created in the world and in the mind of man?"¹⁴³ Instead, logic is elevated as a

¹⁴¹Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 149.

¹⁴²Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 11.

¹⁴³"New Evangelicalism," p. 8.

standard above God by which creatures can pronounce upon the validity of His revelation-claims in the Bible via their estimation of how He conforms to this absolute law. On the contrary, the law of contradiction is to be used to receive and understand God's verbal self-disclosure in the self-authorizing Scripture. It cannot bear the weight put on it by the new evangelical apologetic methodology. It is a God-endowed tool to appropriate divine revelation, not to test it. It is a temporal principle not to be eternalized. Van Til is correct when he traces the laws of logic back to the world view of Aristotle.

The laws of logic as they were worked out by Aristotle presupposed this notion of metaphysical participation [in deity]. And Carnell, following Clark, starts from the law of contradiction as based upon this pagan assumption of man's essential identity with God through the idea of participation in an absolute. The God of his own Christian conviction must be tested as to the truth of the revelation that he gives to men by this absolute which is superior to him.¹⁴⁴

This brings the discussion around to the matter of authority. If the Bible is tested by created principles of human reasoning as administered by the consistent rational man, then man is the ultimate authority. Somehow the absolute law of contradiction is prior to and apart from divine revelation. New evangelical apologists vigorously deny this of course, but their methodology leaves one with no other conclusion. This is an inverted methodology; the Bible is not self-authorizing but instead rests on a foundation of logic in this system. In effect this is telling God that He cannot speak His revelation until autonomous man with his absolute of logic allows Him. And when He does speak, He must speak all His mind, withholding nothing; otherwise the human tester would not have all the necessary data to make a rational choice between conflicting truth-claims. It is fairly self-evident where the true locus of authority is in this methodology. Its first requirement is that Christianity, as a system of truth-claims, accords with "reason" and makes peace with the law of contradiction. After that it must pass muster with the facts of "experience." But authority that must jump through these hoops ceases to be absolute and final.

It is needless to say that this procedure will appear suicidal to most men who study philosophy. Is it not by the help of man's own reason that we are to think out the nature of reality and knowledge? To accept an interpretation of life upon authority is permissible only if we have looked into the foundations of the authority we accept. *But if we must determine the foundations of the authority, we no longer accept authority as authority.*

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

Authority could be authority to us only if we already knew that it had the right to claim authority (*italics added*).¹⁴⁵

And so the new evangelical dislike of “sheer authoritarianism” eventually succeeded in destroying the absolute authority of God and His demands in Scripture. It has been replaced by autonomous human reason. There are probably several foundational reasons why this methodology became so popular among the early new evangelicals. For one, it had been around in Protestantism to one degree or another since the eighteenth century. Bishop Joseph Butler simply put a Protestant facade on Roman Catholic, Thomistic philosophy and apologetics. This was followed, even in Reformed circles, for well over a century, culminating in the USA in the philosophy and apologetics of old Princeton Seminary especially and from there into the evangelical/fundamentalist coalition of the early twentieth century. Also, this methodology coincided neatly with the intellectual and academic aspirations of the new evangelical break-off in the mid twentieth century. It was the desire of the young intellectuals to make evangelical Christianity respectable in the market place of ideas and world views. Fundamentalism, it was thought, was impotent to remake the modern mind,¹⁴⁶ and an apologetic methodology that would take on and refute non-Christian, non-evangelical systems on commonly-held principles was necessary. These young intellectuals were earning doctorates in secular universities and liberal seminaries, and simply felt outclassed by their peers and embarrassed by their fundamentalist, revivalist backgrounds. There seems to have been a high level of intellectual pride involved that soon manifested itself when access to the levers of power was gained in the formation of the new evangelical movement. As Carnell lamented to Carl Henry early on, “we need prestige desperately.”¹⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

The struggle for prestige and acceptance by non-evangelical scholarship proved to be the undoing of the new evangelical movement over the last half of the twentieth century. Slowly the dikes of orthodox theology gave way to the increasingly virulent tides of unbelief. The absolute authority of an inerrant Bible was incrementally ceded to

¹⁴⁵Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p.49.

¹⁴⁶For example, E. M. Blaiklock, “Conservatism, Liberalism, and Neo-Orthodoxy,” *Eternity* (Aug 1960): 23; Nash, *New Evangelicalism*, pp. 22, 26.

¹⁴⁷Letter to Carl F. H. Henry, reported by Henry in his *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), p. 137.

human intellectual autonomy, and this process was not recognized and resisted openly until the 1980s and early 1990s by the new evangelicals themselves.¹⁴⁸ Whether this belated concern will reclaim evangelicalism from the fate of every other movement that substituted man's authority for God's remains to be seen; probably it will not. The vacuity of evangelical theology today can rightfully be traced to the loss of biblical inerrancy. This essay has suggested that the doctrine of inerrancy itself was surrendered finally because the absolute authority of the Bible was vacated and its self-authorizing claims made subject to the inductive search for free-from-God "facts" to verify the Scripture's truthfulness to the satisfaction of creaturely rational autonomy.

The work of the Christian apologist is not to remove the intellectual objections to Christianity by rational argument from a plateau of supposedly common ground. His duty is to meet head-on every part of the thinking of the natural man with *biblical* authority, allowing the Holy Spirit to accomplish His results in the heart and mind. No quarter must be given to apostate thinking by suggesting that the natural man on his principles is right up to a point or that he simply needs to have his memory bank supplemented by more information. A truly biblical apologetics method must knock out all props of self-help and every vestige of intellectual autonomy of the natural man so that his only recourse is the sovereign grace of a loving God who has revealed Himself inerrantly in the self-accrediting Bible and the self-identifying Christ of the Protestant canon.

¹⁴⁸Two examples will suffice: Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984) and David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).