

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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In Defense of Theology

Gordon H. Clark

Editor's Note: The Trinity Foundation has just republished Dr. Gordon Clark's 1984 book, In Defense of Theology. It is available from The Foundation for \$9.95 plus shipping. We have included in this issue of The Trinity Review excerpts from Chapter 4, "Neo-orthodoxy," as a sample of the contents of In Defense of Theology. We hope you will buy and study this book.

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4. Neo-orthodoxy

The third group, Neo-orthodox theologians and pastors, dominate the mainline churches in America and abroad. Because they are the spokesmen for contemporary religion, because they are in the church rather than outside it, many true Christians will have more contact with them than with atheistic scientism. Metaphorically, the defective but cleverly disguised portrait is on the front center of the counterfeit bill.

Neo-orthodox theology, or rather the Neo-orthodox lack of theology, though initiated by Kierkegaard about 1850, and brilliantly abetted by Martin Kähler just before 1900, and also by Martin Buber in the twentieth century, was not widely accepted here until Karl Barth's writings became popular at the end of World War I. In an historical survey it would be proper to construct the discussion in chronological order; but there may be

a pedagogical advantage in working it backward. Contemporary readers usually read contemporary writers who present slightly divergent views, or additional inferences beyond original material. Their views are often persuasive and deceptive. Therefore, it may be permissible to start with contemporary authors and by analysis work back to expose their often hidden assumptions.

A Religion of Experience

One very basic fact can hardly be hidden: Neo-orthodoxy is a religion of experience; not the sensory experience of the scientific secularists, but rather religious experience. This may sound similar to Schleiermacher and Modernism, but the comparison is misleading; for, although he depended on experience, his type of experience was different. Furthermore, Schleiermacher was confident that theology could be derived logically from that experience. Today, rationality and logic are rejected as irreligious – God cannot be understood by reasoned, logical thinking.

To insert an historical aside: We remind ourselves that, in contrast with Romanism, Reformation theology, as found in both Luther and Calvin, made no use of the cosmological argument; Neo-orthodoxy also violently rejects it. While natural theology professed to know a little about God, this new irrationalism insists that man cannot know God at all. Calvin and Barth agree on rejecting Thomistic arguments, but they distinctly disagree on logic: Calvin is praised, or even blamed, for being extremely logical, while modern men consider logic to be the work of the devil.

However, as indicated above, there is some pedagogical advantage in starting with the most recent forms of Neo-orthodoxy and proceeding backward to its origin and first principles. Even so, the basic principles are not hard to find in these contemporary authors, because, following Barth, they redefine the term *theology*. They reject the evangelical definition, but their language may sometimes be more deceptive than Barth's. For example, Helmut Thielicke in *The Evangelical Faith* wrote, "To do theology is to actualize Christian truth, or, better, to set it forth in its actuality and to understand it afresh thereby. To that extent theology is by nature, and not merely in its

pedagogical implications, historical. It has nothing to do with timeless truth or supra-temporal theology (*theologia perennis*)."

This paragraph is confusing. It either gives minor support to the accusation that Neo-orthodoxy is fundamentally irrational, or its idea is very poorly expressed. Does it mean merely that theologians, even Calvin and Hodge, sometimes make mistakes? If so, we can agree. Or does it mean that the works of Calvin and Hodge *never* have *anything* to do with timeless truth? The Bible too? If so, is Thielicke asserting dogmatically there is no timeless truth at all?

An author, like myself, must understand theology afresh. This is obvious, since understanding anything afresh is trivial, because so universal and obvious. My father knew some theology, and I was influenced by him in the books I read, along with other factors; but knowledge is not hereditary, so I had to begin anew. It does not follow that theology "has nothing to do with timeless truth." The aim of every orthodox theologian is to arrive at timeless truths. In doing so, he will make mistakes. However, if he learns that God justifies some men by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, he has grasped a timeless truth. Even the mere historical statement that Christ died in the first half of the first century is a timeless truth. My learning it, the pedagogical implications, as Thielicke calls it, does not make it temporal, relative, or doubtful. It is the truth; and it is the truth we learn.

Thielicke's meaning, I am convinced, is not exhausted in pedagogical trivialities. He has in mind a completely different idea of what theology, or at least Christian theology, is. He writes, "Part of the intellectual honesty of adult man is that in the area of faith he will accept no truth-claim that conflicts with scientific knowledge" (I, 66).

An immediate reply is that so-called scientific knowledge is no fixed irrevocable discovery. Virtually none of the physics I was taught in my undergraduate days is now defended in physics classes. Science is tentative: It is constantly changing. What is taught today will probably be discarded before the end of the century. The theories of light are a well-known example of scientific change. The theory of phlogiston is by now forgotten. Newtonian space and time have disappeared along with his theory of gravitation. Velocity, like the old grey mare, ain't what she used to be. As Einstein has replaced Newton, so a succeeding genius will replace Einstein – as he himself knew so well. Therefore, Thielicke's proposal to test every theological truth-claim by the physics of today is foolish. It is worse than foolish. The idea that science can decide in advance what God can and cannot reveal is utterly non-Christian. Furthermore, his branding Christians as dishonest because they believe God instead of swallowing the presently held laws of physics is arrogance.

A Religion of Irrationality

Another contemporary – he earned his Ph.D. as recently as 1954 – is Langdon Gilkey, whose *Maker of Heaven and Earth* will furnish samples of current Neo-orthodox views. He ridicules *fiat* creation by putting into the mouth of a child the supposedly stupid question, "On what day were crocodiles created?"

Presumably he expresses his own view when he says, "*creatio ex nihilo* seemed to many intelligent Christians, as well as to secularists generally, to be one of those early mythological notions ...which had no real value or validity for a modern man." It is hard to suppose that Gilkey is not one of the "many people [who] reasoned...that if there was any one thing that modern science...had established beyond dispute, it was that the creation stories in the first chapters of *Genesis* were fables and nothing else." This is surely his own view, for he continues, "In this particular argument about the early history of our world, scientific opinion was surely correct." He probably does not apply to himself the criterion that "The first rule of philosophy requires us to cease talking of God as a personal being." But at any rate, "We shall try to reinterpret the idea of creation so that it is not just an irrelevant dogma...but a *symbol* which *points to*...the potentialities of human life." It seems he accepts Existentialism and "mysteries...[that] elude our easy intellectual grasp because they grasp us." These "questions...are peculiarly 'religious'...and are answered in terms of affirmation and trust, rather than in terms of proof and demonstration."

Gilkey will give no *reasons* for his views: He will simply affirm them. I doubt that he can even affirm them, for affirmation requires intelligible language, rather than vague symbolism. His language is vague because he affirms that, "our answers to these questions must satisfy the mind with regard to validity. But...they stem from transforming experiences that are deeper than proof and demonstration." The trouble with such language is, first, it does not estimate how much deeper the abyss of experience is than the profundity or sublimity of demonstration. Then, second, the language is confused because there can be no *validity* without demonstration, because validity is a relationship between a set of premises and a conclusion. No doubt these objections are too logical for an Existentialist.

The further one reads Gilkey's book, the more evident is his irrationalism: "The theologian, however, is more apt to be wary of such demands for total coherence and final intelligibility...the incoherent and paradoxical, the intellectually baffling...character of our experience reflects not merely our lack of systematic thinking, but also the real nature of creaturehood." Above it was said that Gilkey probably believed in some kind of God, and that he did not speak for himself; but now it becomes clear that if God is a personal being, he is an irrational person. He "created" the world that way. The real nature of creaturehood is incoherent; and as it is hard to suppose that a rational God should produce something essentially irrational, one wonders what sort of God Gilkey believes in. Gilkey insists, "To the religious person the philosophical demand for total coherence and intelligibility exposes a blindness...to the real incoherencies and contradictions of life" (37)....

Gilkey...continues with his theme and says, "It is therefore only by analogy and paradox, not by literal 'language,' that we can speak of God as *our* Creator and Lord" (349). But if *Creator* and *Lord* and *God* are analogical and paradoxical terms, without literal meaning, they can be nothing more than nonsense syllables. The origin of such insanity is in the work of Brunner, Barth, and Kierkegaard....

Twofold Truth

...James H. Cone has published three volumes, the last being *God of the Oppressed*. The title indicates and his content makes it certain that “Black theology” and other theologies are not the same. This resembles the medieval theory of twofold truth: What is true in philosophy is false in theology, and conversely. Cone’s “Black theology” resembles twofold truth; if, indeed, he would admit that there is *any* truth in theology. Cone is not greatly interested in the Bible – a particular form of sociology is his canon. If Cone is consistent, a wealthy American, a man of position like Abraham or Job, cannot have God’s truth. Slavery was reprehensible and injustices are still perpetrated against minorities; but this does not justify Cone’s proposition that “any theologian who fails to place that question at the center of his work has ignored the essence of the gospel.” For genuine Christians the essence or center of the Gospel is the atonement; the basis is the Trinity; and the only legitimate source is the Bible....

Neo-orthodoxy is fundamentally (that is, religiously) irrational. Furthermore, many ministers who have not completely deserted the evangelical position are nonetheless sporadically and inconsistently anti-logical. This is not to say that these men make mistakes in their argumentation. We all make mistakes – as Thielicke so carefully pointed out. The idea is, rather, these men deliberately deny the legitimacy of logic for at least some of their arguments. They positively and wittingly defend fallacies.

Brunner, who writes in a much more interesting and readable style than Barth, accepts from Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber – either of whom we might have discussed, though they antedate Brunner – the theory of twofold truth. It is not the medieval theory that what is true in philosophy may be false in theology and conversely; but that in general there is an “It-truth” and a “Thou-truth.” Thou-truth, or *Du-Wahrheit*, encounter, personal acquaintance, is not susceptible to any ordinary rational categories. Indeed, this personal truth is not information at all. Yet it seems to have to be some sort of content, since Brunner holds that it often conflicts with reason. In an unexplained way it informs us that we should not accept this or that valid syllogism. For example, although Brunner accuses Schleiermacher of contradicting himself – and therefore should be rejected – he also rebukes the evangelical theologians for logically deducing predestination from *Romans* 9. Election is illogical, he says. Logically, election implies a God who is not love. One cannot have both logic and a loving God. Calvin is logical, and therefore we must repudiate Calvinism. Calvin mistakenly thought that theology concerned “*einsichtige Vernunftswahrheit*.” Calvin was logical. Paul was illogical. Therefore it follows (by good logic?) that we should be illogical like Paul.

In *Divine-Human Encounter* Brunner teaches that an evil pagan Greek influence in the early church resulted in revelation being seen as a communication of truths. The subject-object relationship, which constitutes propositions, must be excluded from religion. Theological thinking must have subjects and objects, but we are concerned “not with theology but with the Word of God.” God “does not communicate *something* to me [that is, a truth] but Himself.” Even more clearly, “All words have

only an instrumental value. Neither the spoken words *nor their conceptual content* [emphasis added] are the Word itself, but only its frame.” And finally, “God can...speak his Word to a man even through false doctrine....”

To prepare for the following analysis we need to take only two points from Barth’s works. First is his position on Scripture.... “we do the Bible a poor honor and one unwelcome to itself, when we directly identify it...with revelation itself.” Or, finally, “The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office...were actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word.”

The second point for the present purpose is his method for developing theology by means of fallacious reasoning. The crux of the matter, though stated in one complex sentence, is very clear. Of course, Barth gives other expressions of his method; he embraces paradox, refers to God as the Totally Other, and pretty much denies man is the image of God, as *1 Corinthians* 11:9 says.

In stating the criteria of science, or *Wissenschaft*, from which theology must be separated, the first postulate is freedom from self-contradiction. Logic applies to science, but not to theology. He writes, “The very minimum postulate of freedom from contradiction is acceptable by theology only upon the very limited interpretation, by the scientific theorist upon the scarcely tolerable one, that theology will not assert an irremovability in principle of the “contradictions,” which it is bound to make good. But the propositions in which it asserts their removal will be propositions concerning the free actions of God, and so not propositions that “remove” the contradictions “from the world.”

Since these ponderous sentences are good examples of German theology, they must be “unpacked.” Freedom from contradiction, says Barth, is the bare minimum requirement in science. Granted. Science also has other requirements. But theology hardly acknowledges the necessity of being consistent. Its restrictions on the law of contradiction are barely tolerable to a scientist. The most Barth will grant to logic is that theology will not assert that contradictions are irremovable. There is at least a small possibility that contradictions perhaps can be avoided. But theology is not bound to make good on this admission. If theology thus asserts the possibility of avoiding self-contradiction, this assertion does not remove the contradictions “from the world” (so anyone could note their removal or understand their consistency?); they are only assertions that God is under no compulsion to do anything – he is free of all restraints (including the restraints of logic).

These sentences, which I hope I have correctly rephrased, even if the parentheses cannot be sustained, are a more extensive concession than is usual for Barth. In his earlier writings, for example in the periodical *Zwischen den Zeiten*, where the title ordinarily given to his views was “the theology of crisis,” Barth reveled in paradoxes. Theology was bursting with contradictions. Much later he acknowledged he overstated the principle of paradox, but simultaneously insisted that it was *only* an exaggerated use of them: Paradox was still a necessary part of theology.

The implications of this view, in both the logical implications and the historical results, are incredibly extensive. The visible church has frequently been plagued by pseudo-devout mystics

who played their hunches. Careful thinking and dogmatic theology repelled them. For example, A. W. Tozer of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, whom many outside that denomination admired, urged his audiences to pay less attention to the actual words of Scripture, and, instead, search underneath them for the spiritual reality. Probably Tozer was not influenced by Barth; but Barth has influenced many who are personally not inclined to think logically....

Barth's Position

The proper content of Christian language about God, he says, must be known humanly. Its conformity to Christ is neither obvious nor free from difficulties. Dogmatics receives the measure with which it measures in an act of human appropriation. This act has no surety for the correctness of the appropriation. Dogmatics is therefore not knowledge attained in a flash, which it would have to be to correspond to the divine gift. Results in dogmatics are invariably results of human efforts. Here we – Barth is still speaking – must also enter a *caveat* against the old Protestant tradition. The task of dogmatics is thus not merely the continuation, repetition, and transcription of already present “truths of revelation.” Then he adds, “In dogmatics it can never be a question of the mere combination, repetition, and summarizing of Biblical doctrine.”

This group of sentences, partly or fully quoted, combines a few thoughts, which are true, obvious, and trivial, with others that are not obvious in meaning and certainly not obviously true. One of the trivial truths is that man, being human, must know God humanly. Does Barth envisage the possibility that we could know God caninely? Another phrase is not an obvious truth because its meaning is not obvious: conformity of our language to Christ. Would an example of this conformity be, “Christ was born in Bethlehem?” Since Barth does not believe in the bodily resurrection, I would surmise that for him *Luke 24:3* and *John 20:7* are not in conformity to Christ.

Another sentence, stated as a conclusion, but certainly no valid inference from what preceded, is verbatim, “The creaturely form which God’s revealing action comes to take in dogmatics is therefore not that of knowledge attained in a flash, which it would have to be to correspond to the divine gift, but a laborious advance from one partial insight to another, intending but by no means guaranteeing an ‘advance!’”

The end of this sentence seems to suggest...that nothing in dogmatics is true. No one needs to tell us that a laborious process may fail to guarantee an advance. Rather, the intended suggestion is that dogmatic labors never hit upon the truth; and this skeptical idea fits in well with Barth’s general position. But if we cautiously avoid what is only suggested and consider the actual sentence as written, a lesser flaw appears: It states as universally true what is true only in some instances. Must knowledge “corresponding to the divine gift” be “attained in a flash”? Must all “dogmatics” be a “laborious advance”? Neither seems to be true. No doubt Anselm meditated laboriously to find a better proof of God’s existence. Yet, I surmise – for on a much lesser scale it has happened to me also – that the ontological proof burst upon him like a flash of lightning after much rumbling

in the thick clouds. But in other cases dogmatic knowledge is very slowly built up step by step. Hence, I affirm that dogmatic advance may be sudden or slow. Again, take Abraham as one example of knowledge by “divine gift.” When God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham needed no long hours of puzzling to understand the meaning of the words. No doubt he was puzzled with respect to God’s purpose, but the meaning came in a flash. In this case Barth’s statement applies. But in other cases prophets received messages they did not understand, and instead of the knowledge coming in a flash, “the prophets have inquired and searched dilligently...searching what or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ, which was in them, did signify.”...

It is interesting that Barth does not mention logical deduction from Scriptural statements. He is not very fond of logic; he prefers paradox. But in contrast, the *Westminster Confession* says, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life is either expressly set down in Scripture or *by good and necessary consequence may be deduced* from Scripture”.... For an evangelical, theology is not “the *mere* combination, repetition” of Biblical texts, but a summarizing and logical arranging of the main Scriptural doctrines.

The basic trouble with Barth, and with super-devout preachers who, though not consciously Neo-orthodox, separate God from man and make God “Totally Other,” is their repudiation of logic. Ignoring the Biblical proposition that man is God’s image, they have adopted the wrong epistemology.... Let them answer: Is it the correct method to begin with sensory experience and conclude with no God at all, or to begin with hunches and trances and conclude with an unknowable God? Liberal theologians are not disturbed when their experience leads them to contradict the Bible.... But the super-devout still hold the Bible in high esteem. But not in high enough esteem. Let them also answer: Can any of the content of Christianity, such as the doctrines of sin, atonement, and resurrection, be deduced or otherwise derived from any form of experience? Can they even be deduced from Scripture without using logic? The Christian needs a method that arrives at these doctrines. Absence of all method arrives at nothing. Even simple quotation is a method – albeit an inadequate one. Two methods result in a bifurcation that cannot be unified; with two methods there is no method for deciding which method to use and when. This makes theology schizophrenic.

This unpleasant schizophrenia is very clear in Barth and Brunner. When it pleases them...they will follow or take hints from the Bible; then “faith” (I have no idea what they mean by “faith”) curbs their logic. They reject some propositions though they are deduced by as good a logic and as necessary a consequence as those they accept. How then do these theologians know when to curb logic and accept paradox? No principle of logic commands us to abandon logic. Does “faith” so command? How? When? In what circumstances? If Brunner wants to reject the implications of *Romans 9*, cannot someone else reject the implications of *John 3:16*? There is no consistent justification for the introduction of inconsistency.

