

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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A Call for Christian Rationality

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We live in a day when the Apostle Paul's sermon on Mar's Hill to the first century philosophers concerning the worship of an unknown god (*Acts 17*) is all too relevant. Our age is awash in irrationalism; it may even be the "age of irrationalism." And far too many in allegedly Christian circles are espousing an irrational theology in the name of Christ. Nonsense, as C. S. Lewis once predicted, has come. Twenty-three years ago John Robbins correctly assessed the situation:

There is no greater threat facing the true church of Christ at this moment than the irrationalism that now controls our entire culture. [Totalitarianism], guilty of tens of millions of murders, including those of millions of Christians, is to be feared, but not nearly so much as the idea that we do not know and cannot know the truth. Hedonism, the popular philosophy of America, is not to be feared so much as the idea that logic – "mere human logic," to use the religious irrationalists' own phrase – is futile.¹

How did we get where we are? How did irrationalism become so predominant even in allegedly Christian circles? It did not happen overnight. The failure of seventeenth century Rationalism and Galileo's (1564-1642) questioning of the Roman Church-State's official position on geocentricity fostered a spirit of skepticism. Who are we to believe on this subject — the Roman Church-State or Galileo (science)? How do we know? Is there truly a God who has created all things? If so, how can we be sure? Into this debate stepped David Hume (1711-1776).

Being an empiricist, Hume denied that reason can ever give us knowledge of the external world, including God. But

¹ John W. Robbins, "The Trinity Manifesto," 1978.

he also showed, perhaps reluctantly, that sense experience cannot yield such knowledge either. Observation is unreliable. Causal relationships are never observed. Neither can we know the continuing reality of the self, for we have no experience of it. And, of course, no experience can ever prove that the God of Scripture exists.

David Hume created what Ronald Nash referred to as a "Gap." "Hume's Gap," wrote Nash, "is the rejection of the possibility of a rational knowledge of God and objective religious truth."² According to Hume, man can have no knowledge of the transcendent. Any belief in God, therefore, must be irrational. Knowledge and faith have nothing in common.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) acknowledged that reading David Hume awakened him from his "dogmatic slumbers." Kant attempted to go beyond rationalism and empiricism by claiming that all human knowledge begins with sense experience (content), but in itself, sense experience is not sufficient to give us knowledge. The content needs a form or structure. Kant taught that this form is supplied by the mind, in *apriori* categories of understanding. But since men can never know what cannot first be experienced, knowledge cannot extend beyond the phenomenal world. The real world, Kant's "noumenal world," "things in themselves" rather than "things as they appear," therefore, can never be known. Thus, Kant constructed a "wall"

² Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 22. Dr. Robbins had used this phrase in his 1974 book *Answer to Ayn Rand* to refer to the logical gap between the "is" and the "ought" by which Hume destroyed all theories of natural moral law, secular and religious. (See page 136.) Perhaps other writers use the phrase in still other senses.

between the immanent and the transcendent, and God is unknowable.³

It is ironic that Kant believed that this agnosticism was an aid to Christianity. He had “denied knowledge in order to make room for faith.” Belief in God was still possible, but not on rational grounds. Like Hume before him, with Kant there is nothing in common between Christian faith and knowledge.⁴

G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) attempted to correct the errors of Kant. Whereas Kant had asserted with certainty that the real world could not be known, Hegel pointed out the absurdity of affirming the unknowable. He constructed a system of Idealism in which unity and plurality are rationally blended together. For Hegel, “the real is the rational and the rational is the real.” All things, persons and objects, participate in the Absolute Mind or Spirit (*Geist*). Thought and being, essence and existence, are one and the same. As Hegel developed it, his philosophy is a form of pantheism. And in Hegel’s pantheistic philosophy, a problem exists. One cannot know anything without knowing everything; “the truth is the whole.” But since we do not know everything, we do not know anything. Once again, we are left in a state of skepticism. Hegel cannot justify knowledge.⁵

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), like Karl Marx, another irrationalist, was a student of Hegel. He strongly reacted against his teacher’s System. Reality, said Kierkegaard, cannot be obtained by reason. The real is not the rational. Truth is not something that can be taught; it cannot be communicated in a rational fashion. Truth does not exist in the form of propositions; it is inward and purely subjective. If one is going to know the real, he must grasp it by means of a “leap of faith.” That is, he must make a commitment to that which is irrational. For Kierkegaard, faith and reason are mutually exclusive. Knowledge is personal and passionate; it is anti-intellectual. God and truth exist only for one who leaps.⁶

Irrationality also passed into the realm of theology through the liberals Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), both of whom rejected the idea of God’s transcendence. God, they averred, is exclusively immanent. And being totally immanent, God is unable to speak divine truth to man. Hence, Schleiermacher and Ritschl both rejected revealed theology and the primacy of the intellect.

Schleiermacher, sometimes called the father of liberalism, taught that the essence of religion is to be found, not in knowledge, but in experience: the “feeling of absolute dependence.” For Schleiermacher, God is unknowable to

the human mind. To find God one must look within and experience Him. Ritschl, on the other hand, averred that the essence of true religion is ethics. A system of propositional truth is unattainable. Christianity needs to recognize that all knowledge has to do with value judgments, ethical decisions.⁷

Both of these immanentistic theologians denied an infallible standard by which to judge all things. By rejecting the divine propositional revelation of Holy Scripture, they cut the jugular of Christian theism. Man is left without an epistemic base. How does one know what he must “feel”? What is the standard of “ethics” by which man is to live? Schleiermacher and Ritschl leave men without answers. But to the irrational mindset, this is not a problem. In such an anti-system, what does it matter?

In the twentieth century, the Swiss Neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) condemned the immanentism of Schleiermacher and Ritschl as a denial of the Christian faith. Barth taught the divine transcendence of God, to the exclusion of His immanence. According to Barth, God is so transcendent that He is “wholly other.” The Swiss theologian went so far as to deny not only natural theology, but general revelation as well. God can be known only through His self-revelation.⁸

But to Barth, and Emil Brunner (1889-1966) as well, God’s self-revelation is not to be found in the propositional statements of Scripture. In Neo-orthodoxy, revelation is non-propositional. Revelation is an event; it is an encounter; it is something that happens. Revelation is not objective; it is subjective.

According to Barth and Brunner, the Bible is not the Word of God in the usual sense; neither does it contain the Word of God. Rather, the Bible is a book that is full of errors. It contains errors of fact, doctrine, and logic. The Bible is merely a pointer to the Word, which is Jesus Christ. Christ is the only true revelation of God to man. The Bible, then, points to Christ. And when God makes Himself known to man through the fallible Biblical witness, then the “Christ event” occurs. Communication of truth takes place only in the personal divine-human encounter.⁹

Lamentably, irrationalism has greatly affected the visible church. The Charismatic movement is just one example of this. The primacy of the intellect and of truth has been replaced with emotionalism, ecstatic utterances, incoherent experiences, and anti-doctrinal statements (e.g., “give me Jesus, not exegesis”). Faith has nothing to do with thought, let alone logic. All too frequently we encounter what Ronald

³ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (The Trinity Foundation, 2000), 309-328.

⁴ Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 25-28.

⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1995), 63-68.

⁶ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 377-382.

⁷ Colin Brown, *Philosophy & the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 108-116, 154-155.

⁸ See Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* (The Trinity Foundation, 1997).

⁹ Robert L. Reymond, *Introductory Studies in Contemporary Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 91-153.

Nash referred to as “the religious revolt against logic.”¹⁰ Augustine had claimed that God thinks logically, and that logic has been divinely ordained to be trusted and used by man as God’s image bearer, but much of alleged modern day “evangelicalism” demurs. Logic is not to be trusted. Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) is an example of one such thinker. Van Til maintained that there is no point at which man’s logic and knowledge are the same as God’s. Due to this lack of a point of contact, logical paradox must exist in Scripture.¹¹ Van Til went so far as to say that “all teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory.”¹² Van Til’s irrational thought opened the door to all sorts of theological and philosophical errors in putatively Reformed circles.¹³

Donald Bloesch is a contemporary theologian who has attempted to find a middle ground between Neo-orthodoxy, on the one hand, and “right wing” orthodoxy on the other hand. He claims to have a very high view of Scripture. He denounces liberalism, for example, and calls for a creedal theology based upon Holy Scripture. He insists on the primacy of Scripture over “religious experiences,” and he denies that the *Apocrypha* and church tradition have an equal standing with the Bible. But even though Bloesch attempts to remove himself from the Neo-orthodox camp, his writings betray him. The shadow of Karl Barth looms large across the pages of his works. And one of the points at which he finds himself in agreement with Barth is in his rejection of the trustworthiness of logic. For example, Bloesch is quick to take issue with the belief that human logic is identical with divine logic, that is, that God thinks the syllogism Barbara. Dr. Bloesch says we must never equate the two. He openly warns against “reducing the message of faith to axioms of logic.”¹⁴

Gordon Clark corrected this error when he wrote:

To avoid this irrationalism...we must insist that truth is the same for God and man. Naturally, we may not know the truth of some matters. But if we know anything at all, what we must know must be identical with what God knows. God knows all truth, and unless we know something God knows, our ideas are untrue. It

is absolutely essential, therefore, to insist that there is an area of coincidence between God’s mind and our mind.¹⁵

Dr. Clark was not denying that there is a difference in the degree of God’s knowledge and man’s knowledge. God always knows more propositions than man. What Dr. Clark asserted is that there is a point where God’s knowledge and man’s knowledge are identical. There must be a point at which the mind of man coincides with the mind of God. Without this, man could never know any truth.

Hume’s Gap reappears in the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) and a number of his followers (the Amsterdam Philosophy group). These philosophers emphasize the transcendence of God to the point of erecting a “boundary” which exists between God and man. The laws of logic are valid only on man’s side of the boundary. If there were such a Dooyeweerdian boundary, of course, God could never reveal anything to His creatures, and man could never know anything about God, including the notion of the boundary.¹⁶ Dooyeweerd influenced Van Til greatly, and through Van Til, his many disciples.

Another contemporary theologian of irrationalism is John Frame, formerly of Westminster Seminary, now of Reformed Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Professor Frame would have us believe that “Scripture, for God’s good reasons, is often vague.” Therefore, wrote Frame, “there is no way out of escaping vagueness in theology.” He continued:

Scripture does not demand absolute precision of us, a precision impossible for creatures.... Indeed, Scripture recognizes that for sake of communication, vagueness is often preferable to precision.... Nor is theology an attempt to state truth without any subjective influence on the formulation. Such “objectivity,” like “absolute precision,” is impossible and would not be desirable if it could be achieved.¹⁷

Apparently clear and precise theology is a perspective that Professor Frame’s “Perspectivalism” cannot accommodate. But is it true that “Scripture, for God’s good reason, is often vague?” Not according to Reformed orthodoxy, which holds to the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1:7) says it this way:

¹⁰ Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 91-101.

¹¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 95-110.

¹² Cited in John W. Robbins, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth* (The Trinity Foundation, 1986), 25; see also W. Gary Crampton, “Why I Am Not a Van Tilian,” *The Trinity Review*, September 1993.

¹³ See John W. Robbins. “Marstonian Mysticism,” *The Trinity Review*, January/February 1980, reprinted in *Against the World*, The Trinity Foundation, 1996.

¹⁴ Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, & Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 121, 293, 298; see W. Gary Crampton, “The Neo-orthodoxy of Donald Bloesch,” *The Trinity Review*, August 1995.

¹⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (The Trinity Foundation, 1993), 76-77.

¹⁶ Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 96-99.

¹⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 226, 307. These thoughts are echoed by Professor Vern Poythress of Westminster Seminary, and Clark’s comments on them may be found in *Clark Speaks from the Grave*, The Trinity Foundation, 1986.

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

All things in Scripture are not equally clear to all, the *Confession* says, but it never asserts that they are vague or imprecise or confused. It says different readers will be puzzled by some things that other readers will find to be clear. The problem is with our understandings, not with Scripture.

Vagueness in theology, which is what Frame is defending, is not something to be applauded. Obscurity is not a virtue. God is not the author of confusion (*1 Corinthians* 14:33). He does not speak to us in vague, illogical, paradoxical statements, as the Van Tilian school asserts. He reveals himself to us in rational, propositional statements that can be understood. The Bible is a divine revelation that God intends us to understand. Obviously, if it cannot be understood, if we cannot understand it, then it is not a revelation. But David writes: “The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes” (*Psalms* 19:8). John writes: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true” (*1 John* 5:20). The Psalmist knows more than his teachers, more than the ancients, because he knows God’s Word (*Psalms* 119:99-100). The triune God of Scripture is a God of truth: Father (*Psalms* 31:5); Son (*John* 14:6); and Holy Spirit (*1 John* 5:6). The Bible refers to Christ as logic, wisdom, and reason incarnate (*John* 1:1; *1 Corinthians* 1:24, 30; *Colossians* 2:3). Logic is the way God thinks, and the laws of logic are eternal principles. Because man is an image bearer of God, these laws are part of man. There must be, then, a point of contact between God’s logic (and knowledge), and man’s.

Carl Henry wrote:

The insistence on a logical gulf between human conceptions and God as the object of religious knowledge is erosive of knowledge and cannot escape a reduction to skepticism. Concepts that by definition are inadequate to the truth of God cannot be made to compensate for logical deficiency by appealing either to God’s omnipotence or to His grace. Nor will it do to call for a restructuring of logic in the interest of knowledge of God. Whoever calls for a higher logic must preserve the existing laws of logic to escape pleading the cause of illogical nonsense.¹⁸

What I am pleading for is a return to the Christian rationality of Augustine, Calvin, Clark, and the best of the Puritans. Such a system does not exalt the human mind as autonomous; rather, it affirms Biblical revelation as axiomatic. The divine revelation of Holy Scripture is a rational revelation. It is internally self-consistent. It is non-contradictory and non-paradoxical. Christian rationality reasons from revelation, not to it or apart from it. The Christian faith is intellectually defensible. In fact, as John Robbins has stated, “it is the only intellectually defensible system of thought,”¹⁹ for the God of Scripture “has made foolish the wisdom of this world” (*1 Corinthians* 1:20).

Beware of the Intelligent Design Fad

Many Christians have been conned by some of the arguments of scientific creationists, as *The Trinity Review* pointed out back in 1987 (see John W. Robbins, “The Hoax of Scientific Creationism,” July/August 1987), and some are now being conned by the Intelligent Design theorists, many of whom are Roman Catholic.

One of the leading lights of this movement, William A. Dembski, explained his views on page 20 of the March/April 2001 issue of *American Outlook*, published by the Hudson Institute:

I am not a fundamentalist—I don’t take Genesis literally, much less as a scientific text. I accept radiometric dating. I have no problem with common descent, the idea that all organisms are descended from a common ancestor, and thus I have no problem with either macro- or micro-evolution....

Dembski is identified in the article as “associate research professor at Baylor University’s Institute for Faith and Learning.” This is another example of faith-based foolishness, instances of which are multiplying like frogs in Egypt.

Job Wanted

Preacher and teacher seeking employment in a Christian high school or Bible college with possible part-time church duties. M. A. in Biblical Studies from Westminster Theological Seminary (California), 1999. Contact Hugh McCann, 707.762.3354; email: hmccann3@juno.com.

¹⁸ Cited in Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 95.

¹⁹ John W. Robbins, “The Trinity Manifesto,” 1978.