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. (*2 Corinthians* 10:3-6)

Number 338 © 2016 The Trinity Foundation Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692 November, December 2016
Email: tjtrinityfound@aol.com Website: www.trinityfoundation.org Telephone: 423.743.0199 Fax: 423.743.2005

Special Divine Revelation as Rational

by Gordon H. Clark

Editor's Note: This article first appeared in Revelation and the Bible, *edited by Carl F. H. Henry in 1958, and has since been published in* God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics.

The handiwork and the glory of God displayed by the heavens and the firmament have been called general divine revelation. In this category one may also include the constitution of human personality, for man himself is a creation of God and in some sense bears the marks of his Creator. This "light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation." It is thus that the *Westminster Confession* briefly warns us that general revelation is inadequate. This inadequacy is partly a result of the noetic effects of sin, but there is a prior and inherent inadequacy as well.

Inadequacy of General Revelation

The beclouding effects of sin upon the mind as it tries to discover God and salvation in nature may best be seen in the divergent results obtained among the pagan religions. The ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, and Romans looked on the same nature that is seen by the modern Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist. But the messages that they purport to receive are considerably different. This, which is so evident when these faraway religions are mentioned, holds true also within Western civilization. What the humanist and logical positivist see in nature is entirely different from what the orthodox Christian believes about nature. Even if the humanist professes to discover in experience certain moral ideas and spiritual values that are at least superficially similar to those of the Bible, it can well be supposed that he actually learned them from his Christian heritage and not from an independent study of nature and man. The kindly atmosphere of humanitarianism is notably absent from societies to which the Christian message has not been taken.

The existence of divergent concepts of God, of moral ideals, and above all, of schemes of salvation, show the power of sin in the mind of man; but they also show the inherent inadequacy of general revelation. It is not because of sin alone that man fails to get God's message. The truth is that nature has less of a message than some people, particularly some Christian people, think.

The planets above and the plants below show some of the wisdom and power of God; that is to say, they show it to those who already believe that God has created them. Even to a devout Christian, however, the universe does not show the full power and wisdom of God, for God has not exhausted himself in his creation. No doubt the stellar systems display a vast and unimaginable power, yet a greater number of stars with more complicated motions is conceivable. Therefore, omnipotence is not a necessary conclusion from the stars.

Neither is righteousness. The moral attributes that the Bible ascribes to God are still less deducible from an observation of nature. Indeed, the problem of evil – physical calamities like earthquakes, and tragedies caused by wicked men – has led some philosophers to deny God altogether or to posit a finite god. John Stuart Mill thought that the universe tended imperfectly toward the production of good; modern humanists are more likely to say that the universe is neutral with respect to the hopes and aspirations of man; while Bertrand Russell and Joseph Wood Krutch counsel bravery in the face of inevitable defeat. These various opinions, though partly due to human sinfulness, depend as much, I believe, on the inadequacy of general revelation in itself. God's message in the heavens is simply not extensive enough to cover these questions.

Again, the Hebrew-Christian view that "the heavens declare the glory of God" does not, in my opinion, mean that the existence of God can be formally deduced from an

empirical examination of the universe. If on some other grounds we believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we can see that the heavens declare his glory; but this is not to say that a person who did not believe in God could demonstrate his existence from nature. Further reference to this point will be made a little later.

Now, finally, the inadequacy of general revelation is most obvious in the case of ideals or ethical norms. And this inadequacy is not solely the result of sin, but it is an inherent inadequacy. The exposure of infants in Greece, temple prostitution in Babylonia, and human sacrifice in Canaan and elsewhere were not practices which those societies condemned; they had full social sanction. These were their norms; these were their moral ideals. Similarly, contemporary humanism, though some of its values are superficially similar to Christian precepts, diverges more and more from the Biblical identification of right and wrong. Jesus is no longer regarded as sinless, but is accused of minimizing the values of scientific intelligence, of holding inferior sociological views on labor and property, and even of insisting on too rigid a sexual standard.

If, now, someone wishes to argue that this ethical divergence does not indicate the inadequacy of general revelation but merely the darkness of the sinful mind, the clinching reply for a Christian is that God spoke to Adam *before the Fall* and gave him commands that he could not have otherwise known.

When Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden, he did not know what to do. Nor would a study of the Garden have led to any necessary conclusion. His duty was imposed upon him by a special divine revelation. God told him to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue nature, to make use of the animals, and to eat of the fruit of the trees (with one fateful exception). Thus moral norms, commands and prohibitions were established by a special and not a general revelation. Only so could man know God's requirements, and only so later could he learn the plan of salvation.

Such is the Christian viewpoint. Secular philosophers today assert that the story of Adam is a myth, and that the idea of special revelation is irrational. Dependence is placed in reason, not in revelation. All truth is to be obtained by one method, the method of science. The Bible is alleged to be self-contradictory and historically inaccurate; its morals are those of a bygone age; and evolution is credited with disproving creation. These themes have been well publicized and widely accepted. Can the Christian therefore face the charge of intellectual dishonesty, frequently brought against him, and meet the objection that revelation is unreasonable?

Defense of Revelation as Rational

In the history of Christian thought the antithesis between faith and reason has been approached by several different methods. The debate, whether among Christians or between Christians and secularists, sometimes generates confusion because the terms are not always clearly defined. Not only do Augustine and Kant differ as to the nature of faith, but the term *reason* itself has borne different meanings. After providing a minimum of historical background, the writer hopes to avoid such confusion by suggesting a definition of *reason* that may help in the defense of revelation as rational.

The Medieval Scholastic Attempt

In this brief historical survey the first method of relating faith and reason to be discussed will be the Thomistic philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church. Aside from the personal assent of the believer, faith in this system means the revealed information contained in the Bible, tradition, and presumably the living voice of the Roman church. Faith, then, is revealed truth. Reason means the information that can be obtained by a sensory observation of nature as interpreted by intellection. Whereas the rationalists of the seventeenth century contrasted reason with sensation, Thomas contrasts reason with revelation. Truths of reason are those truths which may be obtained by man's natural sensory and intellectual equipment without the aid of supernatural grace.

These definitions of faith and reason make revelation "unreasonable" only in a verbal manner; revelation cannot be called unreasonable or irrational in any pejorative sense. Sometimes one suspects that the secularists seize upon the verbalism to suggest something more sinister.

Thomism indeed insists on an incompatibility between faith and reason, but it is a psychological incompatibility. If the Bible reveals that God exists, and if we believe the Bible, we have this truth of faith. It is possible, however, according to Thomism, to demonstrate the existence of God from ordinary observation of nature. Aristotle did it. But when a person has rationally demonstrated this proposition, he no longer "believes" it, he no longer accepts it on authority; he "knows" it. It is psychologically impossible to "believe" and to "know" the same proposition. A teacher may tell a student that a triangle contains 180 degrees, and the student may believe the teacher; but if the student learns the proof, he no longer accepts the theorem on the word of the teacher: He knows it for himself. Not all the propositions of revelation may be demonstrated in rational philosophy; but on the other hand some truths capable of demonstration have also been revealed to man, for God well knew that not all men have the intellectual capacity of Aristotle; therefore God revealed some truths, even though demonstrable, for the sake of the greater part of mankind.

The non-demonstrable contents of revelation (such as the doctrines of the Trinity and the sacraments), though outside the range of reason as defined, are not irrational or nonsensical. Medieval Mohammedans and modern humanists may claim that the Trinity is irrational, but reason is quite competent to show that this doctrine does not contain any self-contradiction and that the objections to

it are fallacious. The higher truths of faith do not violate any of the conclusions of reason; on the contrary, the doctrines of revelation complete what reason could not finish. The two sets of truths, or, better, the truths obtained by these two different methods, are complementary. Far from being a hindrance to reason, faith can warn a thinker that he is blundering. One should not picture the believer as a prisoner to his faith who should be liberated; faith restricts only from error. Thus faith and reason are in harmony.

Only one criticism of this construction will be made, but it is one which Thomists and objectors alike will concede to be crucial. If the cosmological argument for the existence of God is a logical fallacy, Thomism and its view of the relation between faith and reason cannot stand.[1]

The difficulties with the cosmological argument recall the earlier comments on the inadequacy of general revelation. If it is assumed that all knowledge begins in sensory experience and that therefore one looks out on nature in ignorance of God, the manifest calamities of men and the finitude and change of nature – vast though the galaxies may be – preclude any necessary conclusion to the existence of an omnipotent God who is good as well.

To these objections, which David Hume stated so forcefully, may be added specific criticisms of Thomas' Aristotelian formulation. Three will be mentioned. First, Thomism cannot survive without the concepts of potentiality and actuality, yet Aristotle never succeeded in defining them. Instead he illustrated them by the change of phenomena and then defined *change* or *motion* in terms of actuality and potentiality. To justify this objection would require too much technical apparatus for the present purpose; and if the reader wish, he need put no stress on this first point.

Second, Thomas argues that if we trace back the causes of motions, still this regress cannot go on to infinity. The reason explicitly given in the *Summa Theologica* for denying an infinite regress is that in such a case there could not be a first mover. But this reason, which is used as a premise to conclude for the denial, is precisely the conclusion that Thomas puts at the end of the complete argument. The argument is supposed to prove the existence of a first mover, but this first mover is assumed in order to deny an infinite regress. Obviously, therefore, the argument is a fallacy.

There is a third and still more complicated criticism. Inasmuch as this involves material that has recently become a subject of widespread debate, it is worthy of more detailed attention.

For Thomas Aquinas there are two ways of knowing God: First, the way of negative theology, which we shall not discuss; and second, the method of analogy. Since God is pure being, without parts, whose essence is identical with his existence, the terms applied to him cannot be used in precisely the sense in which they apply to created things. If it is said that a man is wise and that God is wise, it must be remembered that the wisdom of man is an acquired wisdom, while God has never learned. The human mind is subject to the truth; truth is its superior. But God's mind is the cause of the truth by thinking it, or, perhaps, God is the truth. Hence the term *mind* does not mean precisely the same thing in the case of God and man. Not only these terms, but the notion of existence also, is not the same. Since God's existence is his essence – an identity unduplicated in any other instance – even the word *existence* does not apply univocally to God and the world of creation.

At the same time, Thomas does not wish to admit that the terms are equivocal. When it is said that playboys lead *fast* lives, while ascetics *fast*, the word has no meaning in common. Though the letters and pronunciation are the same, the intellectual contents in the two instances are utterly diverse. Between such equivocation and strict univocity, Thomas asserts that words may have an analogical use; and that in the case of God and man, the predicates are applied analogically.

If, now, the analogical meanings of *wise* or of *existence* had a common area of meaning, that common area could be designated by a univocal term. This term then could be applied univocally to God and man. But Thomas insists that no term can be so applied. This in effect removes all trace of identical meaning in the two instances. But if this be so, how can an argument – the cosmological argument – be formally valid when its premises use terms in one sense and the conclusion uses those terms in a completely different sense? The premises of the cosmological argument speak of *the existence of movers* within the range of human experience; the conclusion concerns the *existence* of a *first mover*. But if these terms are not taken univocally, the argument is a fallacy.

Therefore, the Thomistic attempt to relate faith and reason – more because of its view of reason than its view of faith – must be adjudged a failure, and another attempt must be made to defend the rationality of revelation.

The Renaissance Attack

The dominance of the medieval scholastic viewpoint, of which Thomas was the most brilliant example, ceased with the Reformation and Renaissance. Since this chapter aims to defend the Reformation position, the Renaissance will be discussed first. The discussion must be extremely brief; for, since the Renaissance gave rise to modern secular

[1] Some Romanists take the cosmological argument, not as logically demonstrative, but as a method of directing the attention to certain features of finite beings from which the existence of God can be seen without a discursive process. Compare E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images*, 84. But, I judge, this is not standard Thomism.

philosophy, the subject is too vast; modern philosophy, moreover, is not a method of harmonizing faith and reason, but of denying faith in favor of reason. Nevertheless, something ought to be said to indicate that this modern attack on revelation has not been completely successful.

Certain details of the attack – such as the allegations that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because writing had not yet been invented in his day, and that the Hittites never existed – are more appropriately treated under the topic of Higher Criticism. Here only the guiding principles of its philosophy can be kept in view.

These guiding principles were those employed in the crucial problem of knowledge. Epistemology is the attempt to show that knowledge is possible, and modern philosophy is heavily epistemological. Did these schools succeed in establishing rational knowledge apart from faith or revelation?

The first main school was the seventeenth-century school of Rationalism. Their basic belief was that all knowledge is derived from logic alone. One should note that by *reason* these men meant logic as opposed to sensation. Experience, in their opinion, was the source of error. Only that which could be demonstrated as theorems of geometry are demonstrated (that is, without appeal to experimentation) is trustworthy.

In general, these thinkers (of whom Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz were by far the greatest) relied on the ontological argument to prove the existence of God. The ontological argument contends that God has the attribute of existence just as a triangle has the attribute of containing 180 degrees. To deny that God exists is as much a self-contradiction as to deny the geometrical theorem. Thus the existence of God is proved by reason alone, that is, by pure logic, without an appeal to sensory experience. Then from the existence of God the rationalists attempt to deduce the laws of science.

Not many contemporary philosophers think that the ontological argument is valid; no contemporary thinker admits that Descartes or Spinoza succeeded in deducing the contents of science in the manner indicated. However stimulating the rationalists may be, however informative on some points, they are universally judged to have failed in the main matter of showing that knowledge is possible. Therefore a Christian can legitimately claim that their attack on revelation collapses with their system as a whole. This is a brief and summary treatment of Rationalism indeed, but no one will expect a complete history of modern philosophy in these pages.[2]

Empiricism remains today as a living philosophy. Therefore it may not be said that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are universally regarded as complete failures. Yet today's Empiricism is noticeably different from the eighteenth-century variety; and in some cases where it shows greater similarity, one wonders what answers the empiricist would give to the standard objections against Hume.

There are three chief objections to Empiricism. First, the impossibility of discovering any "necessary connection" between events or ideas (that is, the denial of causality) makes historical and scientific investigation futile. At best, knowledge could not extend beyond one's own present impressions and their traces in memory. Second, the disintegration of the "self" results in a world of perceptions that no percipient perceives. This in effect annihilates memory. Third and fundamental, Empiricism makes use of space and time surreptitiously at the beginning of the learning process, while explicitly these concepts are learned only at the end. Thus empirical objections to revelation, and in particular Hume's argument against miracles, are deprived of all foundation.

Immanuel Kant tried bravely to remedy the defects of Empiricism by assigning to the mind certain *a priori* forms. Space and time were supposed to preserve meaning for sensory experience, and the *a priori* categories were to make thinking possible. Kant's works stand as a monument to his genius, but hardly had the later volumes been published than Jacobi put his finger on a very sore spot. To enter Kant's system it is necessary to assume "things-in-themselves," but the full theory of categories makes the assumption impossible. This conflict between the *a priori* forms of the mind and the matter given in sensation started the advance to Hegel.

During his lifetime G. W. F. Hegel attained the acme of professional recognition, and for seventy-five years more his thought was extremely influential. Yet today we see that two of his students who completely rejected his absolute idealism, Karl Marx and Soren Kierkegaard, have won the decisive battle against him. There are still idealists, of course, and Hegel may still count a few followers. But the assertion of Hegelian bankruptcy cannot be dismissed as a prejudiced Christian device to maintain a theory of revelation.

However, as long as Hegel has some disciples and as long as remnants of Empiricism remain, one might insist that these philosophies have not been conclusively refuted. Therefore, although these viewpoints are not, in my opinion, the characteristic position of the twentieth century, a Christian defense of revelation is probably under some obligation to show how they should be treated. Unfortunately, not more than one example can be included.

The late Edgar Sheffield Brightman worked out a philosophy of religion along mainly empirical lines, though retaining some ideas from Kant. Values and religious ideals were to be discovered in experience; revelation either plays no part, or, if it is theoretically possible, still it must be judged on the basis of reason. Revelation, he says, must be

[2] For Dr. Clark's treatment of modern philosophy please see *Modern Philosophy*, Volume 5 in *The Works of Gordon Haddon Clark*. *– Editor.*

tested by reason, not reason by revelation. By the term *reason*, Brightman does not mean the processes of logic as did the rationalists; for him, reason is a set of empirically derived principles by which we organize the universe of our experience. He speaks of concrete, empirical reason as opposed to bare, formal logic. Revelation, he asserts, cannot be used as the basic principle by which to organize experience.

Historically, of course, revelation has been so used; and Brightman never shows why, if there is a living God, revelation could not possibly furnish us with information that would enable us to understand the world and organize our lives. Serious flaws in Brightman's conception of God I have discussed elsewhere (compare *A Christian View of Men and Things*).

What is perhaps the basic difficulty is one that Brightman shares with the humanists, though generally he and they are in radical disagreement. Their concurrence on this point therefore gives it considerable importance, for it furnishes a test that extends beyond the views of one man.

The vulnerable point of Brightman's empirical method, and of all contemporary Empiricism, is the professed derivation of genuine values from experience. That there are factors in experience which people actually enjoy is not to be denied. But the problem is to go from the actual and diverse enjoyments to values that have a legitimate claim upon all people. One man enjoys prayer; another whiskey. One man enjoys the life of a retired scholar; another enjoys being a brutal dictator. Can experience show that these are anything more than personal preferences? Can experience furnish a ground for a universal moral obligation? It is my conclusion, supported by detailed argument in the volume just cited, that this is impossible. For such reasons, then, these remnant philosophies fail to undermine Biblical revelation.

Post-Hegelian philosophy is an important factor in arriving at this negative judgment on the "reason" of Spinoza, Hume, and Hegel. The criticisms of Marx, Nietzsche, and the contemporary instrumentalists have damaged this reason beyond repair. Insofar as these men have signalized the failure of modern philosophy to solve the epistemological problems, their conclusions seem incontrovertible. But since they are violently opposed to revelation, they have been forced to adopt a skepticism so deep that not even reason in the sense of the laws of logic is exempt.

In anticipation of Freud, Nietzsche tells us that all thinking is controlled by biological functions. The distinction between truth and falsity as such is unimportant: A false opinion that sustains life is better than a truth that does not. In fact, truth might well be defined as the kind of error without which a species cannot live. Logic, with its law of contradiction, is the result of a blind evolution which might have been different. At any rate, logic falsifies nature; it puts different things into the same category by ignoring their differences; and the coarser the organ, the more similarities it sees. The fact that we use logic merely signifies our inability to examine more closely, and the result is that logic holds good only for assumed existences which we have created and not for the real world.

F. C. S. Schiller, A. J. Ayer, Jean-Paul Sartre – each in his own way attacks the necessity of logic. Thus the typical philosophic position of the twentieth century is not so much to be designated skepticism as outright irrationalism.

The Neo-orthodox Compromise

Although these men are openly anti-Christian, there is also a twentieth-century form of irrationalism, derived directly from Hegel's student Kierkegaard that clothes itself with Christian terminology and tries to avoid the excesses of Nietzsche by an appeal to revelation. It sometimes claims to be a return to the Reformation point of view. One must ask not only whether this claim can be historically justified, but more particularly whether this philosophy provides an adequate validation of the Christian concept of revelation.

This so-called Neo-orthodox or existential movement willingly admits that reason has come to grief. Even inanimate nature is beyond intellectual understanding because there is no motion in logic and no logic in motion.

Becoming is open and reality is chance. If logic founders on physical motion, it is all the more impotent in the issues of life. What is needed is not conclusions but decisions. We must therefore make a leap of faith and accept a revelation from God.

To many devout people disturbed by the popularity of secular scientism, oppressed by the deadening influence of Modernism, and (unjustifiably) frightened by the negations of Higher Criticism, Neo-orthodoxy seemed like manna from on high. Revelation had now been saved; reason had been defeated!

However, before the heirs of Luther and Calvin can properly rejoice, they must know precisely what this revelation is, what sort of faith is meant, and whether anything of worth remains after reason's defeat. The failure of seventeenth-century rationalism causes no alarm; the fate of Hume and Hegel can be taken in stride; Brightman's concrete and empirical reason can well be dispensed with – but what remains if reason, in the sense of the laws of logic, has to be abandoned? Of what value would be an irrational or illogical revelation?

The chief law of logic is the law of contradiction, and it is this law that maintains the distinction between truth and falsity. If this distinction cannot be maintained, then (as the ancient Sophists showed) all opinions are true and all opinions are false. Any proposition is as credible as any other. If therefore Nietzsche or Freud have used reasoning in coming to their position, and if reasoning distorts reality, and if one theory is no more true than another, it follows that these men have no good ground for asserting their

theories. To deny reason, in the sense of the laws of logic, is to empty conversation or argument of all meaning.

Now, this is what Neo-orthodoxy (as well as Nietzsche) does. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard says that it makes no difference whether a man prays to God or to an idol, provided he prays passionately. Truth, he says, lies in the inward How, not in the external What. If only the How of the individual's relation is "true," then the individual is in truth – even though he is thus related to untruth.

Brunner also abolishes the distinction between truth and falsity. First, he refers to a kind of "truth" that cannot be expressed in words or grasped in intellectual concepts. What this truth is, no one can say. Second, the words and sentences, and intellectual content that "point to" this hidden truth may or may not be true. God can reveal himself through false propositions as well as through true ones (*Wahrheit als Begegnung – Truth As Encounter*, 88). We can never be sure, therefore, that what God tells us is true. Falsehood and truth have equal value.

Surely such value must be very little. For one thing, it relieves us of the responsibility of being consistent. Our creed can contain contradictory articles. Brunner argues that "straight line inference" must be curbed. We dare not follow out our principles to their logical conclusions. Not always, at any rate. Brunner, indeed, points out Schleiermacher's contradiction in insisting both on the absoluteness of Christianity and the discovery of a common element in all religions. He is also consistent when he argues that man must have been created righteous, for otherwise there could have been no Fall. But when Brunner comes to *Romans* 9 and finds its obvious meaning distasteful, he declares that election is illogical and that if we drew inferences from it, we would conclude that God is not love. One cannot have love and logic both. Hence the Bible is consistently illogical.[3]

But if the Bible is illogical and if Brunner is illogical, do we not have a logical right to ignore them, for there is no illogical necessity that our faith should leap in their direction?

The purpose of the whole argument to this juncture has been to make three points: Neo-orthodoxy's irrational defense of revelation is self-destructive; modern philosophy's rational attack on revelation left itself without an epistemological foundation; and the kind of reason Thomism used to defend revelation was beset with fallacies. But now, to continue the argument, the general procedure of Reformation thought provides another possibility for a rational revelation.

The Reformation Way

In this case, a rational revelation is one that preserves the distinction between truth and falsity. It is in its entirety self-consistent. In other words, reason is identified as the laws of logic. Christianity is under no obligation to justify itself as rational in any other sense, for the history of philosophy has shown that all the other senses result in skepticism. Therefore, to claim that election, or the atonement, or any other doctrine is "irrational" is nothing more than to assert that these doctrines are distasteful to the objector. The accusation is not a substantiated intellectual conclusion, but an emotional antipathy. If the Biblical doctrines are self-consistent, they have met the only legitimate test of reason. This test of logic is precisely the requirement that a set of propositions be meaningful, whether spoken by God or man. And if propositions have no meaning, obviously they reveal nothing.

It is now fair to ask whether this construction is historically the Reformation viewpoint. Did Martin Luther and John Calvin accept the Bible as self-consistent, and did they recognize the sole test of logic?

The first of these two questions is the easier to answer. That the Bible presents a self-consistent intellectual system, and that Calvin was convinced of it, has been made sufficiently clear in his *Institutes* and *Commentaries*. The *Westminster Confession* is additional testimony. The Calvinistic love of logic is well known; and, as has been seen, it was a distaste for Calvinism that led Brunner to reject logic. This point, therefore, is characteristic of the Reformed Faith.

The second of these two questions is more complicated because the Reformers did not explicitly discuss logic as the sole test of a rational revelation. Their silence is understandable, however, for irrationalism is mainly a twentieth-century phenomenon that they did not anticipate. Nevertheless, that the preceding construction is implicit in their views may be plausibly inferred from their methods. They abandoned the scholastic philosophy; they spent no time attempting to prove the existence of God, much less the sensory origin of knowledge; the contrast between the *Institutes* and the *Summae* of Thomas is unmistakable. Hence they could not have used any "concrete and empirical reason." Then, too, the principle that the Scriptures are their own infallible interpreter, and that what is unclear in one passage can be understood by a comparison with other passages, is nothing other than the application of the law of contradiction. Logic therefore must have been the only test that the Reformers could have used.

I freely admit that some passages in Calvin seem to allow for a less skeptical reaction to the course of philosophy than this chapter presents. They must, however, be understood in the light of other very definite statements found in the same contexts.

[3] For a thorough analysis of Brunner's thought, see the excellent volume, *Brunner's Concept of Revelation*, by Paul King Jewett, James Clarke & Co., 1954.

One of Calvin's most generous acknowledgments of pagan learning is made in the *Institutes*, II.ii.14*ff*. The following summary and interpretation can easily be compared with the original. After rejecting the Platonic pre-existence of the soul, Calvin asserts that human ingenuity constrains us to acknowledge an innate intellectual principle in the human mind. Since this could not possibly be Brightman's concrete empirical reason, is it not more likely that Calvin had the laws of logic in mind? With this innate equipment, Roman lawyers delivered just principles of civil order; philosophers described nature with an exquisite science; those who by the art of logic have taught us to speak rationally cannot have been destitute of understanding; pagan mathematics could not have been the raving of madmen. No, the writings of the ancients are excellent because they proceeded from God.

This is indeed high praise. In fact, it is such high praise that its object can hardly be the absolute theoretical truth of pagan philosophies. Admittedly, Calvin was unaware of how mistaken the ancient learning was; nor can it be supposed that he had elaborated an instrumental theory of science. Yet his admiration of the physics, logic, mathematics, and other arts and sciences of antiquity can comfortably and more plausibly be divided between the intellectual brilliance displayed and the practical applications made possible. It is the energy, the ingenuity, the exquisiteness of the ancients that he admires, rather than the truth of their systems.

In the immediate sequel, Calvin corrects some misapprehensions of his intention. With respect to the kingdom of God and spiritual wisdom, the most sagacious of mankind are blinder than moles. The most apposite of their observations betray confusion. They saw the objects presented to their view in such a manner that by the sight they were not even directed to the truth, much less did they arrive at it. Fortuitously, by accident, some isolated sentences may be true; but human reason neither approaches, nor tends, nor directs its views toward the truth of God.

That Calvin did not base the truth and rationality of Scripture on external supports is better seen in an earlier chapter (I, viii). The title is: "Rational Proof to Establish the Belief of the Scripture." In a twentieth-century setting this title is misleading. Today such a title would suggest an appeal to the superior authority of, perhaps, religious experience. This was not Calvin's intention.

He says that without a prior certainty of revelation – a certainty stronger than any judgment of experience – the authority of the Scripture is defended in vain by arguments, by the consent of the church, or by any other support. Faith is founded, not in the wisdom of men, but by the power of God. The truth is vindicated from every doubt, when, unassisted by foreign aid, it is sufficient for its own support. The thought of this significant sentence is repeated at the end of the same chapter. While there are many subsidiary reasons by which the native dignity of the Scripture may be vindicated, he says, such alone are not sufficient to produce firm faith in it till the heavenly Father – revealing his own power therein (that is, in the Scripture itself) – places its authority beyond all controversy.

To these words of Calvin I should like to add only that the law of contradiction, or reason, is not an external test of Scripture. Logical consistency is exemplified in the Scripture, and thus the Scripture can be a meaningful revelation to the rational mind of man. Self-contradictory propositions would be meaningless, irrational, and could not constitute a revelation.

Some Contemporary Problems

If now Calvin could not have addressed himself explicitly to twentieth-century problems, the obligation lies the more heavily on us. Of course there are many, but there is one immediate attack on the possibility of a rational revelation that ought not to be ignored.

Theories of the origin, nature, and purpose of language have been recently developed that would prevent God from speaking the truth to man on the ground that language cannot convey literal truth. Some writers say that all language is symbolic or metaphorical. For example, Wilbur Marshall Urban (*Language and Reality*, 383, 433) asserts, "There are no strictly literal sentences…there is no such thing as literal truth…and any expression in language contains some symbolic element." Other writers make more restricted claims and say only that all religious language is metaphorical; from which it follows that if God uses language, he cannot tell the literal truth, but must speak in symbolism or mythology.

Those who defend the Bible as a true revelation must insist that it conveys literal truth. This does not mean that God cannot sometimes use symbolism and metaphor. Of course there is symbolism in *Ezekiel*, there are parables in the *Gospels*, and there are metaphors scattered throughout. God might have used even mythology and fable. But unless there are literal statements along with these figures of speech – or at the very least, unless figures of speech can be translated into literal truth – a book conveys no definite meaning.

Suppose the cross be selected as a Christian symbol, and suppose some flowery speaker should say, Let us live in the shadow of the cross. What can he mean? What does the cross symbolize? Does it symbolize the love of God? Or does it symbolize the wrath of God? Does it symbolize human suffering? Or does it symbolize the influence of the church? If there are no literal statements to give information as to what the cross symbolizes, these questions are unanswerable.

Let a person say that the cross symbolizes the love of God. However, if all language or all religious language is symbolical, the statement that the cross symbolizes the love of God is itself a symbol. A symbol of what? When this last

question is answered, we shall find that this answer is again a symbol. Then another symbol will be needed, and another. And the whole process will be meaningless.

This contemporary theory of language is open to the same objections that were raised against the Thomistic notion of analogical knowledge. In order to have meaning, an analogy, a metaphor, or a symbol must be supported by some literal truth. If Samson was as strong as an ox, then an ox must literally be strong. If Christ is the lion of the tribe of Judah, then something must be literally true about lions and about Christ also. No matter with what literary embellishment the comparison be made, there must be a strictly true statement that has given rise to it. And a theory that says all language is symbolic is a theory that cannot be taken as literally true. Its own statements are metaphorical and meaningless.

Furthermore, a theory of language has to be taken as a part of a more general philosophic system. While some linguists may study a few minute details, a theory that concerns the origin, the nature, and the purpose of language presupposes some overall view of human nature and of the world in which mankind exists. The contemporary theories are often based on an evolutionary philosophy in which human language is supposed to have originated in the squeals and grunts of animals. These evolutionary theories of language, and some that are not explicitly evolutionary, reveal their connection with epistemology by making sensory impressions the immediate source of language. The first words ever spoken were supposedly nouns or names produced by imitating the sound that an animal or a waterfall made; or if the object made no noise, some more arbitrary method was used to attach a noun to it.

When this view is accepted by Thomists, they inherit the problem of passing from a sensory-based language to a proper mode of expressing theological propositions. The logical positivists, on the other hand, conclude with more show of reason that this cannot be done, and that theological language is nonsense. But in any case, a theory of language must be set into a complete system of philosophy. It cannot stand in isolation.

Both the naturalistic evolutionist and the evangelical Christian have their guiding principles. The former has no choice but to develop language from animal cries – no matter what the difficulties may be (and they are insuperable). The latter, by reason of the doctrine of creation, must maintain that language is adequate for all religious and theological expression – no matter what the difficulties may be (but they are not very great). The possibility of rational communication between God and man is easily explained on theistic presuppositions.

If God created man in his own rational image and endowed him with the power of speech, then a purpose of language – in fact, the chief purpose of language – would naturally be the revelation of truth to man and the prayers of man to God. In a theistic philosophy one ought not to say, as a recent Thomist has said, that all language has been devised in order to describe and discuss the finite objects of our sense-experience (E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images*, 101). On the contrary, language was devised by God; that is, God created man rational for the purpose of theological expression. Language is, of course, adaptable to sensory description and the daily routine of life, but it is unnecessary to invent the problem of how sensory expressions can be transmuted into a proper method of talking about God.

This immediately overturns the objection to verbal inspiration that is based on the alleged finitude and imperfections of language. If reason, that is, logic, which makes speech possible, is a God-given faculty, it must be adequate to its divinely appointed task. And its task is the reception of divinely revealed information and the systematization of these propositions in dogmatic theology.

To sum up: Language is capable of conveying literal truths because the laws of logic are necessary. There is no substitute for them. Philosophers who deny them reduce their own denials to nonsense syllables. Even where the necessity of logic is not denied, if reason is used in some other sense as a source of truth, the result has been skepticism. Therefore, revelation is not only rational, but it is the only hope of maintaining rationality. And this is corroborated by the actual consistency that we discover when we examine the verbally inspired revelation called the Bible.