

[*The Gordon-Conwell Lectures on Apologetics, 1981*]

“What is Apologetics?”

The very first thing to be made clear in a course in apologetics is the nature and scope of the subject. One must answer the question, “what is apologetics?” The situation is similar to that of the bumper sticker which reads “Christ is the answer” and its not too flippant reaction, “what is the question?”

Many a student has been disappointed with an apologetic system because its parts did not answer the questions he thought it should. And others have been deceived because they accepted so-called answers to questions that were irrelevant. Therefore, it is necessary at the beginning to state the nature and scope of apologetics. This may take more time than some are willing to spend, and it may be too elementary for others who are impatient of results.

One example of impatience and misunderstanding will suffice to particularize the general principle. Knowing that the historical accuracy of the Scriptures is under attack, and realizing that if the Bible is in error on earthly things, it cannot be trusted on heavenly things, a student may take great, even excessive, delight in the archaeological discoveries that have corroborated the Scriptural statements. I, too, delight in these archaeological confirmations.

But one must understand that they do not demonstrate the inerrancy of Scripture. To show that a document correctly describes one event is not to show that its other statements are true. Since, too, the heavenly things outweigh in importance the particularities of history, and since archaeology can contribute nothing to the establishment of theological doctrine, one is forced to conclude that archaeological evidences are much less useful than empirical apologetes are wont to think.

And, as before, any time you wish to interrupt or ask questions, please do so. That doesn't irritate me at all. It's something I like.

But I am getting ahead of my story. As a further introductory note, let us survey, very briefly, several views of what apologetics is.

A book called *Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics*, a book written – at least a chapter written – by Greg Bahnsen in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, edited by Gary North, on page 192 and 193 – and incidentally, if you don't interrupt me, I shall interrupt me. [Audience laughter]

My good friend Carl Henry, most of whose work I read before he ever publishes it, has the unfortunate habit of name-dropping. And I have remonstrated with him gently against this. And I have urged him to quote fewer people – many fewer – but quote them more at length, so that the students or the readers will have more notion of the theories of the men he's talking about. Well, that's not his style, and I have my style. I think quoting is very important, because otherwise you open yourself to the charge of missing the point, or erecting straw men, or that sort of thing.

Being sloppy. So you need to quote and refer to specific authors. But I don't think you need to refer to 100 different specific orders in 10 pages – I'm exaggerating, I think maybe it takes Carl 15 pages to refer to them [Audience laughter] But at any rate, it is good to quote and nail the thing down.

Now, Bahnsen quotes Ramm as giving more than a dozen definitions of apologetics. I'm not quoting the definitions, but I'm shortening them and mentioning them. For example, first – and some of this has to do with the relation between philosophy and apologetics – but here are ten things that are mentioned in Ramm's book as Bahnsen quotes them.

One: Philosophy is something for which theology has no need. Two: Philosophy is theology's servant. I suppose theology needs philosophy then. Three: Philosophy is independent of theology. Four: Truth is probability, which I suppose would be – who's the fellow at Ligonier? – Sproul. I suppose that would be Sproul's position. Truth is probability. Fifth: Truth is consistency, a view which has sometimes been attributed to me, but although in a sense correct it's very inadequate. Six: Truth is paradox. That's Kierkegaard and Van Til. [Audience laughs] Oh, it is, yeah, it is, it is. And particularly, one of Van Til's defenders, Frame. I'll talk about Frame later on in the course. Seven: Truth is a common ground based on common grace. Eight: It's an evidence of the means of certifying Christianity. Nine: Truth is only appreciated after regeneration, never before. And truth in apologetics is irrelevant and useless, which I suppose most students would hope it would be. Etc.

I just mentioned that to show there are quite a number of different views, maybe overlapping, but nonetheless different, as to what apologetics is and what the relation of philosophic apologetics to Christianity is. The previous mention of archaeology, and the brief enumeration of a dozen or more aims and methods, leads to a comparison of three different seminaries.

There is one seminary – so I have been told and therefore I won't give its name, since I've only been told this, but anyhow it's somebody's opinion of this seminary – so, there is one seminary that deliberately excludes what has usually been called apologetics, and has replaced it with archaeology. Now, I know what seminary I'm referring to, and I know at least one of the men as a friend of mine for many, many years, and I imagine that this statement is correct. But I've never checked it out and so won't mention the name of the seminary. But there's no apologetics, and it has been replaced by archaeology. This, I believe, is a major blunder.

There is another seminary whose courses basically represent one form of traditional apologetics, and I refer to Westminster Seminary and Professor Van Til's presuppositionalism.

There is a third seminary, and it is the Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver, where the courses in apologetics follow a different tradition, a tradition which in Presbyterian circles – they're Baptists, of course – which in Presbyterian circles was represented by Hodge and Warfield.

The mention of these seminaries and these professors indicates that apologetics is no easy subject. The latter two – that's Westminster and Conservative Baptist – the latter two and indeed

all three make philosophically fundamental assumptions involving more than ordinary complexities. But as there seems to be no other than these three general possibilities, the answer to what apologetics is turns out to be a choice from among these three procedures. All of these procedures have one thing in common, and this concord can furnish a preliminary definition of apologetics. They all, in one way or another, seek to defend the truth of Christianity against the attacks of its enemies.

But the three attempts to do this differ fundamentally from one another in their starting point, in the extent of the subject matter, and in their logical consistency. Since their very starting point is in question, each apologete must begin by showing that his Christian and his non-Christian opponents fail at the beginning. Some impatient students want so-called positive results immediately. They find the refutation of opposing views too negative, time-consuming, and almost worthless. Yet the only way to support the choice of one of these procedures rather than another is to show that the others do not solve the problem.

To counsel patience, to exhort the young student – and you all are pretty young. Why, none of you remember the sinking of the Titanic. You're just little children. I wager – this is most marvelous, miraculous, and incredible – I wager that not many of you even remember the Second World War. It's hard for me to believe. None of you were at the Battle of the Bulge? And you don't know anything about Peenemünde? Terrible. To counsel patience, to exhort the young student to studying long and hard, to stress difficulties in apologetics that even some mature apologetes underestimate, justifies a few more thoughts along this line. The Christian wishes in some way to defend Christianity.

Now, in the world, Christianity competes, not only with Buddhism, Islam, and Zen – and your seminary had the – I would say the – privilege of a man who wrote a pretty good book on Zen. He's no longer here. I keep up correspondence with him. I guess you all know him, don't you? But also – not only Islam, Buddhism – but also with Hegelianism, logical positivism, existentialism, and with what other philosophical systems there may be.

Since these systems use history, physics, psychology, linguistics, and the entire college curriculum, the Christian apologete must have definite views and detailed arguments on all these subjects. Therefore, apologetics cannot be so narrowly restricted to a few popular points, nor so sharply distinguished from science and philosophy as some Christians think. Apologetics must be a comprehensive philosophy.

This needs emphasis, not only among evangelicals at large, but even among those more closely connected with Calvinism. To confront secular systems, the Christian must present a system. Christianity is a system, and the ministers in traditional Presbyterianism, and in the denomination of which I am a member, acknowledge in their ordination vows that they accept a system of doctrine.

The value – indeed, the indispensable necessity – of a system can be illustrated from military annals. A single military action must attack some particular strongpoint at a given time. But to do

so effectively, it must be a part of a larger campaign, and the larger campaign must be governed by a plan that includes the whole war... and you don't even remember World War II!

Now, Winston Churchill has six big volumes on World War II. Please read all six, and see that he had a system. And it's just too bad that Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to undermine the system – oh, he agreed mostly with it, but he made some awful blunders. We are indebted, not to Franklin D. Roosevelt, but to Winston Churchill.

Not to speak of World War I or World War II – which you don't remember either of them – I'll take something you do remember, our Civil War. [Audience laughs] Our Civil War was directed by an overall strategic plan. McClellan defended Washington. He did a good job of that, but he didn't do a good job of anything else, and he was supposed to do something else. McClellan defended Washington, Grant cleared the Mississippi and captured Vicksburg, Rosecrans fought from Nashville to Chattanooga, where again Grant defeated Bragg, and Sherman marched through Georgia from Atlanta to the sea.

You know what song I'm quoting there? You don't even know the national songs! Where did you grow up? [Student: Canada.] [Audience laughter] “God save the Queen, and heaven bless the maple leaf forever.” Well, I don't expect you to know our Civil War songs if you're a Canadian, just let's raise the maple leaf.

So, too, as McClellan defended Washington, we must defend our base: the truth of Scripture and its main doctrines. But we must also attack secular science, secular historiography, and secular linguistics. The foundation of a strategy to meet all objections against Christianity is definitely technical. It is not a matter of ordinary, everyday conversation. Let me illustrate.

On a very superficial level, yet indeed a lively, contemporary controversy among professing Christians, is the question of speaking in tongues. One side says that those who have never had the experience cannot judge of the matter. The other side says that experience is not the criterion; we must rather judge experience by the Bible. Beyond the range of professing Christians, David Hume rejected miracles and, in particular, Christ's resurrection on the basis of experience. Schleiermacher, early last century, initiated modernism by insisting that all doctrines must be tested by experience.

This raises the fundamental problem of apologetics. When one says, “I believe in the resurrection” or “I believe in tongues” or even “I believe in God,” the non-Christian will ask “how do you know?” This is true in physics and geology also. If someone asserts a law of physics or proposes a geological explanation of Yosemite, his colleagues will ask “how do you know?” They want to examine his methods. They want to see his criteria for knowledge. Theories concerning the criteria for knowledge are, in technical language, called epistemology. When a scientist or an historian asserts that he knows something, his statement is not acceptable unless he explains how he came to know it. “How do you know?” is the last question to be asked and epistemology is the first subject to be established.

Some devout Christians do indeed accept an empirical epistemology. My very orthodox Lutheran friend, John Warwick Montgomery – you all know him, do you, you’ve all heard him lecture, he’s a very clever lecturer. Oh, he’s very interesting, I wasn’t being derogatory. No, he’s brilliant... except he’s wrong. [Audience laughs] My very orthodox Lutheran friend, John Warwick Montgomery, thinks we can achieve theological knowledge by simply reading it off historical events. A liberal, like G. Ernest Wright, also thinks this possible, but he reads off a vastly different theology. This lecture now aims to show that epistemology is basic to apologetics, and second, that empiricism is totally unsatisfactory.

In the Middle Ages during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas substituted the empiricism of Aristotle for the so-called Christian Platonism of Augustine. Although Aquinas tried to make metaphysics the basic subject, and thus reverse the position Augustine had given to epistemology, even so, Aquinas had to acknowledge that the crucial question came in epistemology.

Instead of recognizing that God had endowed mankind with an original or *a priori* intellectual equipment, Aquinas held that man’s mind started as an empty blank, and all his knowledge began in sensory experience. I don’t know whether Aquinas originated the phrase “tabula rasa.” I doubt that anybody before him used it, but I just don’t know. I’m not sure. But I do know that he used it. You will find it in his text, the Latin text, that the mind at birth is a tabula rasa – a clean sheet, nothing written on it, absolutely without *a priori* equipment, a blank mind, on which the experiences of sensation writes themselves and are the basic elements of knowledge.

In modern times, Schleiermacher, with certain modifications I cannot take time to explain in this lecture, Schleiermacher introduced religious experience or empiricism into Protestantism. Religion was to be based on experience. In effect, this eliminated theology in favor of the psychology of religious experience.

Now, Schleiermacher apparently wished to retain a semblance of doctrinal orthodoxy, but his followers applied experience more and more consistently, dropping one doctrine after another, until Schleiermacher’s modernism became 20<sup>th</sup> century humanism. And if you wish to read the history of this development from Schleiermacher to modern humanism, Edwin Burt has a book called *Types of Religious Philosophy*, and his account of the history of it is better in the first edition than in the second. He may improve the second in other ways, but he dropped out the history by which he traced the development of American modernism from Schleiermacher into the humanism in which you find it today, or at least earlier in this century. And that’s a very good chapter to read. It’s near the end of the book. The chapter heading is probably “From Modernism to Humanism” or something like that, and it deals a good deal with the Chicago theology that began around the First World War – maybe a little before – and continued for a time. Then I’m trying to think of one of the men who defined God – I have such trouble with names. I can remember Plato and Aristotle but I can’t remember the names of very many Americans, and so I forget. But anyhow, it’s a good historical – of course, Burt is a humanist, but his historical account of the developments from modernism to humanism is a very good historical account.

For this reason, it is not effective strategy to defend one doctrine after another. Frontline fighting is essential, but it is doomed to defeat unless the enemy's central facilities of production are bombed out of existence. Therefore, we must oppose, not only the psychology of religious experience, but the central issue of empiricism as a whole.

Empiricism is the theory that all knowledge depends on sensory perception. Thomas Aquinas, many Lutherans, unfortunately, and even some Calvinists have advocated this epistemology, but its chief exponents have been secularists like David Hume, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, and, more recently, the logical positivists with their slashing attacks on metaphysics and theology.

Some contemporary evangelicals – indeed, some of my very good friends – support empiricism and claim that my arguments to the contrary merely repeat ancient Greek skepticism. This cavalier treatment must face a twofold reply. First, to say that an argument comes from a Greek skeptic does not refute the argument. A mere denial is never a refutation. What these evangelicals should do is to show precisely how the arguments are fallacious. This they have repeatedly failed to do, and I hold that on their principles they cannot do it. Then, second, if these persons had read a few contemporary textbooks on psychology, they would not have asserted that these arguments merely repeat Greek skepticism. That they overlap is no doubt true, but 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology adds details that the Greeks never thought of. Permit me to mention just a few of the difficulties which, in my opinion, empiricism cannot handle.

Now, I must ask for your patience, but the refutation of opposing theories is a preliminary to the establishment of my own view. And really, that ought to be the method anybody takes. Now, since empiricism seems to be very much common sense and people accept it unthinkingly, I want to spend a little time refuting the views of John Warwick Montgomery, what's-his-name I just mentioned a minute ago up there in Ligonier – I don't know why I always forget his name. I remember John Warwick, but I have an awful trouble with names. I remember Carneades, of course, know him quite well, but anybody beyond antiquity I can hardly remember. I do remember World War I, though, it was a man by the name of Hindenburg.

Now, here are some of the arguments that I use in opposition to empiricism. One of the most interesting ones – how many of you know the drawings by Escher? How many – oh, good, I'm happy to see there are some artists in the class. All right, I think Escher is a perfectly good argument against John Warwick Montgomery and all empiricists. And Escher is not a Greek skeptic, he is a contemporary artist.

And for the rest of you who don't know him, he has complicated the simple drawing which nearly all of you have seen of the stairway – you look at it, and it seems that you're looking down at it, and then you blink your eyes, and you're looking up from under it. And it flutters back and forth in front of your eyes. And you can't tell which flutter is the truth and which is false. So is experience. But Escher does it much better than the unartistic psychologists. So if you haven't ever seen Escher's drawings, please do. I hope you have a copy of some of them in the library, do you? Those of you who raised your hands, did you see them in books here?

[Student: I wasn't raising my hand to say that I've seen his artwork. I'd just like to make a comment.]

Oh, just a minute. Well, does anybody know whether his drawings are in a book in the library? Please, somebody find out and tell me tomorrow morning. Now what's your question?

[Student: Could it be that the difference is – we view it one way, and it's like our eyes say "here's another way" – could it be that the difference is not a disagreement about what is actually on the page but is a disagreement in how we happen to conceptualize or organize it?]

Precisely, yes, and that's what happens all the time. And hence, can't trust your senses.

[Student: But then my point is that the senses at that point are not trying to make a statement about what is there.]

The senses give you two different impressions, and you're looking at the same piece of paper, if there's a piece of paper there to look at.

[Student: Yeah, but I don't suppose empiricists would say that, that there are two different...]

Oh, you have to.

[Student: Yeah, but he would have to say what is on the page is objective. I mean, the empiricists obviously would not say that.]

An empiricist would have to say that but it's obviously false because you see two different things on the page.

[Student: But that's why [indistinct] a representation of two dimensions. If that staircase was in front of you, with your hands you could go up and touch it and feel whether you are looking up at it or looking down.]

Oh you think the fingers are more accurate than the eyes? I'll take that up in a minute.

[Student: Ok, in order to say that the senses deceive you, the only way you're going to be able to do that is to have one sense [indistinct] compare it to another sense...]

And if the two senses disagree between themselves, then what?

[Student: Usually you give preference to the...]

To the what? To which one?

[Student: The touching one.]

Oh yes. And therefore, when you put a toothpick between your two fingers like this you know it's two toothpicks and not one, because you feel it as two and see it as one?

[Student: Hm]

Hm. [Audience laughter] And in addition to Escher, do you know what trompe-l'oeil is? Anybody know trompe-l'oeil? If you know Escher, you must know enough art to know trompe-l'oeil? Huh? Well, the term of course means a deception of the eyes. But it's a particular method of painting. And these paintings are so constructed: if you put them on the wall, a flat wall, you are quite sure that there is a recess there and that you can put your hand in and get it. And you see the recess. That's why it's called trompe-l'oeil, it deceives the eyes. Yes?

[Student: To me, I guess it doesn't follow from the idea that we don't always distinguish reality properly by our senses, that reality is therefore indistinguishable.]

Let me ask you this question: if a witness in a criminal case is shown to have perjured himself, how much credence do you give to the other statements he made?

[Student: Uh... not a whole lot.]

Not a whole lot, yes.

[Student: But my point is simply that if...]

And since if your eyes deceive you once, you can't believe any of it.

[Student: But then by the very fact that we can conclude that our eyes have deceived us implies that there is some criteria by on the basis of our senses which we can tell that they are deceiving us.]

No. Not at all. You only know that you have two sensations which contradict each other – they can't both be true, you know one must be false but you don't know which one.

[Student: But then there's the fact that we do make judgments all the time...]

Yes, but we often make wrong judgments.

[Student: But there are judgments about which we agree and judgments about – every time we talk we use language that is drawn from the...]

I don't know whether we agree. I find more people who disagree with me than agree.

[Student: But there are things about which we agree. I'm not saying that we are always correct but I think there are some things we can know on the basis of our senses.]



But if two propositions are contradictories they cannot both be true, and your senses give you contradictory propositions. So whichever one is false – whichever one is true, the other is false; and hence, you can't trust your senses. They've committed perjury. Next one.

[Student: I was going to say, I took psychology in my undergraduate work, and one of my fields of study was proprioception which is the study of how the senses interact with one another. And there's so much evidence showing how the senses constantly deceive each other. You can set up controlled experiments – it would just amaze you at how much your senses can deceive one another. That's quite a growing field.]

Maybe once in a while someone agrees with me. [Audience laughter] Back there. Yeah, you.

[Student: Why have a court system if we can't trust any witnesses? And why cross the street if we're not sure whether a car's going to hit us or not?]

I'm going to use that example as one of my main arguments – the court system. In fact, I used this with John Warwick Montgomery a little bit ago when we both talked to the same audience. This last winter – now, I don't know whether it was in January or February, it might even have been – but rather recently, a man who had been convicted of murder and who had been in jail for fifteen years was let go because another man confessed to the murder. Now, here we had in the original trial, you had twelve jurors. They all agreed on the witnesses' positions. From what the witnesses had said, putting it all together, all twelve of them agreed that this man was guilty. Now, in a murder case, with the laws as they are to protect innocent people – and they're rather strict – twelve people, and I would suppose all of them or nearly all of them were quite honest – certainly most of them would be honest – twelve people were convinced beyond any moral doubt that this man had committed murder, and all twelve of them were wrong.

[Student: So maybe that happens in 1% of the cases.]

And therefore, you discard all the other cases.

[Student On what basis do you say... so if you were a court justice, would just throw out the whole court system?]

No, I wouldn't. I would admit that it is frequently mistaken.

[Student: So are you then saying that sometimes our senses can be mistaken?]

Yes.

[Student: Or are you saying that they're totally untrustworthy?]

If they contradict, one of them may be right, you know. If the two things are contraries, why then, they can both be wrong. But if they're contradictories, one must be right. The trouble is you can't tell which. You know one is wrong, but you don't know which one's wrong.

[Student: Ok, but usually our senses don't conflict with each other. Then I think we can [indistinct]...]

Oh, I think they often do, more than just once. In fact, I think I have that experience every day. I want to give the – very well.

[Student: I don't want to anticipate too much, but doesn't it seem like even to – we're people who base our apologetics on the Bible, or even our theology on the Bible. Doesn't that imply the necessity of sense perception?]

No.

[Student: So we don't have to be able to read the Bible or hear?]

I shall take up that question, but at present, I wish to show that you can't trust your senses. Please let me give other people a – you know, I don't want to cut you off, but yes.

[Student: I probably shouldn't ask this question while you've already said it, but you defined empiricism a while ago as the position of all knowledge...]

Yes, the mind is a blank sheet at the start; hence, the first lessons it gets are from sensations.

[Student: you also made some statement to the effect that all knowledge is based on sense experience?]

Yeah.

[Student: I should have asked before could you explain more what your mind thinks?]

Oh, yes. The mind has no *a priori* forms. The first tiny bit of information is a sensation. The next tiny bit is a sensation. And as these bits accumulate, you put them together and so on, and the bits of sensation are organized into whatever complicated knowledge you might claim to have. But everything comes out of sensation. The mind as such has no form at all; there are no *a priori* forms.

In the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, there used to be – maybe there still is – but there used to be (I haven't been there in ten years), but there used to be a recess in the wall, down around the basement around the corner. And in this recess there was a vase with a rose in it. And on the wall under the recess there was a sign: "you may put in your hand and take the rose," which of course, I proceeded to try to do. And when I put in my hand, the rose wasn't there anymore. When I took it out, there was the rose, I could see it quite clearly. Put in my hand, the rose disappeared. Took my hand out, the rose was quite visible. Was there a rose there? Did my eyes tell me the truth or did they deceive me? I didn't touch the rose, but then that's the absence of a sensation – but there's something peculiar about it.

[Student: How did you know that you see – on what basis [indistinct]?)

Because if your senses say two incompatible things, one of them must be false. Now, in this case, the two incompatible data were not given at the same time. You can say if you wish that there was a spring and when you put your hand in, somehow you touched a spring and the spring took the rose away and then when you put your hand out the rose came back. But that wasn't the way it was done.

[Student: How does one know that they're incompatible?]

Beg pardon?

[Student: How does one know that they're incompatible? If the two are incompatible – for instance, in the drawing, you observe the drawing and you say it appears to you, but how do you know that they are actually incompatible?]

Well...

[Student: How do you not know that the art is intended to draw a picture that would give...]

Well I suppose he did.

[Student: Yeah, and so that means that our senses [indistinct]...]

He intended to deceive us and we are deceived, yes.

[Student: So intent is [indistinct], correct?]

They are doing the incorrect job correctly.

[Student: But your mind is what deceives you, not your senses.]

On the empirical basis, everything in the mind is sensation and its combinations. There isn't anything else.

[Student: But the only doubt that the senses can make – when you look you saw a flower and when you touched you didn't feel one.]

I didn't touch it, you can't touch it. There's no sense of touch at all there.

[Student: You reached out to touch it, you didn't touch a flower.]

No, no.

[Student: There's no contradiction until your mind tells you there's a contradiction. It's not the senses that are saying they're contradictory, is it?]

The two senses contradict.

[Student: the mind that deceives you [indistinct] assuming the law of non-contradiction.]

No, no, because on empiricism the mind has no *a priori* form. It's totally blank. And on their theory, you must construct the law of contradiction from the sensations, and that's something else I'm going to try to show is impossible.

[Student: how does one even know there are two contradictory elements apart from sensations? It's either you have to admit empiricism to maintain that it's not [indistinct].]

Yes, that's right, only they're not data. If I had the graceful, long fingers that some charming young ladies in this course have, I could run – what's the fellow's real scales? You know who I mean. Sonata K 554. Anyhow, you notice my – what's that?

[Student: A little [indistinct].] [Audience laughs]

No, I...

[Student: [indistinct] don't apologize for that.]

I'll think of it in a minute. Now, if I had long graceful fingers like some of the young ladies have who can run scales, you could take a toothpick or something like this, and you see one thing going through your fingers, you feel two. These sensations occur at the same time, and they cannot both be true. But you have these two inconsistent, incompatible sensations at the same time. Or, take another familiar illustration: the fishing pole that you drop into the water. It looks crooked, but as the gentleman on the left says, you always trust your fingers and not your eyes, it feels straight, but it looks crooked. The two sense contradict each other at the same time.