

[From the Gordon-Conwell Lectures on Apologetics, 1981.]

A Christian Construction, Part 1.

Many Christian evidentialists, unwilling to accept liberal or neo-orthodox visions, are nonetheless unwilling also to hack away and dig out the roots of non-Christian branches of learning. When a non-empirical apologetic is presented to them, they almost always reply with the boldest and most naive *petitio principii*, “don’t you have to read your bible.”

I’ve heard that more than once you know.

[Audience laughter]

A serious apologist cannot ask this question until after he has defined sensation and explain its relation to perception. Apologetics, or Christian philosophy, has the task of formulating a complete and consistent theory from beginning to, if not end, at least as far as one can go.

But it must start at the beginning. When someone asks “don’t you read your Bible?” he is assuming that a Bible is certain sensations of black and white without combination, arrangement, or intellectual interpretation. Now this is clearly not the case. The perception of a Bible is somehow ordered and interpreted. The apologist must explain how. An empirical appeal, like the sight of a Bible, can not be the beginning of an epistemological theory. If the apologist cannot show how perception of a Bible develops from sensation he has no basis for his empiricism. He has no defense against a spiritual rationalism. The former, so we apprehend, lands him either into behaviorism or chaos, which are much the same thing. The latter provides for an intelligible message from God.

Even some non-empiricists try to connect sensation with perception. Brand Blanshard, an Hegelian, not a Christian, in his brilliant volume *The Nature of Thought*, tries to make perception an inference from sensation. And then he argues about it for 75 pages. He indicates that nobody ever has a sensation after he is maybe six or twelve weeks old, or something. He has to be a baby, and there are no sensations anymore. And even what people call a sensation of blue is not a sensation but a categorization.

I’m down to the bottom of page 132. The early analyses of logical positivism and similar views, some other arguments against empiricism are made. For full discussion the reader must consult the 2500 year history of philosophy. Yet a few samples may suffice for the present time. First, sensation or perception is untrustworthy. What one person sees as red and green another sees as two shades of grey. Or maybe not even as two shades. One focus makes a small near object, if

such is the case, appear as a far large object. If a piece of canvas is painted half red and green and a grey stroke put through them, you see different colors as I explained before. This background of the two colors is one of the factors that give the object its observed qualities.

Hence the Bible in your hand is not itself black. And if we do not know what color it is, how can we know it is a book at all? This question must not be ignored if one wishes to be an empirical apologist. Remember the Texan rancher who was sure he was seeing a mirage and drove his Jeep into a lake. First the usual form of the illustration is he thought it was a lake and it turned out to be a mirage, but it works both ways you know. And the same difficulty recurs between eating ice cream and drinking grapefruit juice as opposed to drinking grapefruit juice and eating ice cream.

Though Thomas did not seem troubled by these points, even he acknowledged that the sense organ had to be healthy in order to perceive the real color or taste of an object. But who knows whether his sense organs are in perfect condition or not? Even when medical tests discover no disease in the sense organs of two persons, must we say that one person is sick because he does not like the taste of onions and the other is well because he gets a pleasant taste from them? Differences in tastes, optical illusions, tricks in perspective, color blindness, and then the two definite and two manifold distinctions in colors that other people call hallucinations, fill elementary textbooks on psychology. The apologist who wants an empirical theory of language or an evidentialist defense of the faith or to examine the foundation on which he wishes to rear a superstructure.

It is interesting to note what Calvin has to say on these subjects. To be sure he was not a philosopher, but a good theologian must have some opinions on epistemology. And incidentally, for half of you at any rate, please learn how to spell epistemology. The following quotations will show that he was not exactly an empiricist. "The eye accustomed to seeing nothing but black judges that to be very white which is but whitish or perhaps brown. If at noon-day we look either on the ground or at any surrounding objects we conclude our vision to be very strong and piercing. When we raise our eyes to the sun they are at once dazzled and confounded. And we are constrained to confess that our sight is dimness itself."

Some more from Calvin. The powers of the soul are far from being limited to functions subservient to the body. For what concerns has the body in measuring the heavens, counting the number of the stars, computing their several magnitudes and acquiring a knowledge of their respective distances. In these profound researches relating to the celestial orbs, there is no corporeal cooperation, but that the soul has its functions distinct from the body."

There is more. A paragraph or two ago the theory that perception is an inference was found wanting. But if one tries to escape this inference theory, he faces a harder difficulty. It's this. At

any one time the person has dozens of alleged sensations. In order to get a perception you have to combine some of them. On what basis do you make the combination? And no empiricist that I've ever heard of has ever answered that question.

Bottom of page 134. The next difficulty, and with this one we may need no more to rid ourselves of it, is the formulation of concepts. Formation of concepts requires imagery, knowledge of concepts depends on images. Yet, not everybody has images. Even though they are expert physicists or literary men of ability. And Aristotle's attempt to explain this simply depends on an illustration that has no particular meaning. That takes us to near the middle of page 135.

Christianity, however, must have what most people call abstract concepts. You realize, I don't assert that myself. But this is popular language. Empiricism with its nominalism, cannot produce concepts such as justification, federal headship, or Trinity. Nor can it produce the concept of the general conic, of vertebrate animal, or of tennis. To speak more precisely there are no such things as abstract concepts. Abstraction is impossible. This leads to another point. And, you see, if you simply assert "it is possible" my answer is "show that it is, don't just assert it, show it." And I would like to see somebody try to do that. Not merely Brand Blanshard. He tried, and I tried to point out his mistake. But other people don't try.

This leads to another point. When a Christian uses the word 'justification,' 'trinity,' or 'theology,' he is using a name to designate a series of propositions. A student does not know botany, he knows that asparagus and the star of bethlehem are members of the liliaceae. Now I suppose you will say now I assert the knowledge of botany is possible. Of course I don't. I'm using this as an ad hominem affair as usual. I'm pointing out that Botany isn't anything that can be known. And what Botanists claim to know is not Botany but certain propositions. To know theology is to know that Adam was the federal head of the race. And that the elect sinner is justified by means of faith alone. Propositions, not concepts, are the objects of knowledge because only propositions can be true.

Theological propositions are usually universal propositions. And for that reason cannot be empirical. Empiricism is ruled out, not because these propositions are matters of revelation undiscoverable by the unaided human mind, but because they are universal. "All who are justified are justified by faith alone" is a universal propositions, but induction never arrives at universals. And induction is all that empiricism has. By induction a young ornithologist may observe a thousand black crows, not to repeat all the difficulties of seeing even one black crow, and on the basis of these thousand observations he is likely to assert "all crows are black." Then the thousand-and-first crow is an albino. Induction never arrives at a universal . If so used, it is always a logical fallacy. And if you try to see how Feigl, who is discussed in the part, how Feigl tries to squirm out of it maybe you'll be more impressed with the argument as a whole.

Empiricism therefore is in a sad state. So that not much can be said in favor of the language theory or a theology based on it.

Finally now the constructive theory can begin. If the secularist doubts that there is or can be a Christian theory, the Christian may doubt that the Bible discusses language at all. What verse or chapter defends metaphysics? What book gives us any verification principle? The Psalms indeed are poetry, but do they tell us that poetry is an advance over myth on the way to parables? That sentence refers to Kenneth Hamilton that I haven't read too. Do they teach otherwise?

Though many believe that the Bible is silent on these philosophical matters, the following is an attempt to show that the Bible answers all of these questions and with reasonable clarity.

The first part of the answer, the first element in a Christian theory of language, and therefore the first criteria for judging the adequacy of Biblical revelation, is the doctrine of the image of God in man. Or rather the very first part is the Biblical doctrine of God. Is God the "totally other"? Do God and the medium of conceptuality *schliessen einander aus*? That means, completely exclude each other. Or is God an object of thought and knowledge as much as, or even more than, the square root of minus one.

In thinking about God, Calvinists almost immediately repeat the shorter catechism and say, "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable." Perhaps we do not pause to clarify our ideas of spirit, but hurry on to the attributes of wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. But pause. Spirit, wisdom, truth. Psalm 35 addresses God as "O Lord, God of Truth." John 17:3 says, "this is life eternal that they may know thee, the only true God." First John 5:6 says the spirit is truth. Such verses as these indicate that God is a rational, thinking Being whose thought exhibits the structure of Aristotelian logic. If anyone objects to Aristotelian logic in this connection, and presumably he does not want to replace it with Boolean-Russell symbolic logic, let him ask and answer whether it is true for God that if all dogs have teeth, some dogs (spaniels) have teeth. Do those who contrast this 'merely human' logic with a divine logic mean that for God all dogs may have teeth while spaniels do not. Similarly with merely human arithmetic two plus two is four for man, but is it eleven for God?

The verses quoted in the next to the last paragraph are only a small fraction of all those which teach the rationality of God. The mass of material that asserts or implies God's omniscience, material to which Charnock devoted a good 200 pages, would, if repeated here, impress those who have unfortunately never read Charnock, but would doubtless seem tedious to others. Its shortest summary is 1 Samuel 2:3 "The Lord is a God of knowledge." Special mention should be made however of God's seeing the end from the beginning. And doing all things well. His moral

governs of angels and mankind. His choice of means are sometimes surprising to accomplish his plans. And of course the plans themselves.

From the multitudinous instances, let us consider only 2 Chronicles 14:20, from these chapter two texts are examined. “The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is perfect toward him.” And 18:19. Some sort of misprint here, I’m sure it isn’t verses 221. That beats the 119th Psalm, doesn’t it? “The Lord said, who shall entice Ahab? Then there came out a spirit and stood before the Lord and said ‘I will entice him.’ And the Lord said, ‘Thou shall also prevail. Go out and do even so.’” Here the Lord is said to have had and to have executed a rational plan to destroy Ahab. If now God works all things against his enemies, for our good and for his glory, we may confidently insist that God is a rational being the architecture of whose mind is logic. Irrationality contradicts the Biblical teaching from beginning to end. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not insane.

To be precise one should not speak of the image of God in man. Man is not something in which somewhere God’s image can be found along with other things. Man is the image. This of course does not refer to man’s body. The body is an instrument or tool man uses. I am well aware that many of the Dutch theologians disagree with that assertion but I disagree with the Dutch theologians. The body is an instrument or tool man uses. He himself is God’s breath. The spirit God breathed into the clay. That is, the spirit, the mind, the thinking ego. Therefore man is rational in the likeness of God’s rationality. His mind is structured as Aristotelian logic described it. That is why we believe that spaniels have teeth. I think the spaniels occurred on a previous paragraph, not too far back. In addition to the well-known verses of chapter 1, Genesis 5:1 and 9:6 both repeat the idea. First Corinthians 11:7 says that man is the image and glory of God. See also Colossians 3:10 and James 3:9. Other verses not so explicit nonetheless add to our information. Compare Hebrews 1:3, Hebrew 2:6-8, Psalm 8. But the conclusive consideration is that throughout the Bible as a whole the rational God gives man an intelligible message. Now there is a footnote to an article I wrote some time ago. This intelligible message not only includes accounts of historical events and God’s explanation of them, but also a number of commandments and precepts. Though the gift of rationality was an inestimable blessing, it carried danger with it. Because animals are non-rational they cannot sin. Man could and Adam did. The very possibility of sin depends on a law that God imposes and that man can understand.

This point brings us to the central issue of language. Language did not develop from, nor was its purpose restricted to, the physical needs of earthly life. What I am denying here is the usual view of language which you will find in most secular language philosophers. God gave Adam a mind to understand the divine law. He gave him language to be able to speak to God. From the beginning language was intended for worship. In the *Te Deum*, by means of language, and in

spite of the fact that it is sung to music, we pay metaphysical compliments to God. You remember that is what one of the previous writers said that we did not do.

The debate about the adequacy of language to express the truth about God is a false issue. Words are mere symbols or signs. Urban distinguished between signs and symbols. If this distinction be accepted, words are signs. Even if his onomatopoeia-ic words are symbols it does him little good for there is no inherent quality in the sound of *dog*, *chien*, or *hund* to make it mean a certain type of animal. Any sign would be adequate. The real issue is, does a man have the idea to symbolize? If he can think of God, then he can use the sound God, deus, theos, or elohim. The word makes no difference. And the sign is ipso facto literal and adequate. Those who resort to myth, parables, or imagery, and one of these fellows who I didn't read what's his name, it was before Hordern, Hamilton yeah, tried to develop language through first myth, then poetry, and then parable. And you can read that. I'm not promising that is one of the questions. That is a possible question on the quiz. Anything in the latter half of this is. But that is one theory of language.

Those who resort to that sort of thing, pictorial symbols used for inconceivable objects, and who declare that language is inherently inadequate, and have you ever heard some preacher indicate that God talking to us would be like our talking to a bird. We would have to somehow lower ourselves to the level of a bird so that we could use bird language for the bird to understand. This is utterly unscriptural for birds are not created in the image of God, and men are. And this sorta picture, illustration, which several ministers have used, just doesn't do the Scriptures justice.

Those who resort to myth and so on and who declare that language is inherently inadequate and the mind inherently incompetent to speak about God, as Barth and Brunner do, deny that God is able to attach signs to thoughts and to create a mind that can understand the thoughts. The God of Gilkey and Hamilton is not omnipotent. He's not God almighty. He is powerless to give man any understanding of himself. Their God is unable to speak the truth to Abraham, nor can Abraham address himself intelligibly to Him. The Christian view on the contrary is that God created Adam as a rational mind. The structure of Adam's mind was the same as God's. God thinks that asserting the consequent is a fallacy and Adam's mind was formed on the principles of identity and contradiction. This Christian view of God, man, and language does not fit into any empirical philosophy. It is rather a type of a priori rationalism. Man's mind is not initially a blank. It is structured. In fact an unstructured blank is no mind at all. Nor could any such sheet of white paper extract any universal law of logic from finite experience. No universal and necessary proposition can be deduced from sensory observation. Universality and necessity can only be a priori. Now that's one of the troubles with modern science. Its laws are all based on an incomplete induction plus other factors that they don't always acknowledge either, but anyhow. You cannot get a universal proposition by any series of observations. This is not to say that all

truth can be deduced from logic alone. I have been accused of saying that but I never have said it. I just want to make it clear that I am not following Descartes in saying that all knowledge can be deduced from logic alone. The seventeenth-century rationalists gave themselves an impossible task.

Even if the ontological argument be valid it is impossible to deduce *cur deus homo*, the Trinity, or the final resurrection. I wish you would read Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, and see that at the beginning and at the end he claims not to use any scriptural material at all. That is his aim and that is his claim. If you read it I think you will be convinced that it is a failure.

The axioms to which the a priori forms of logic must be applied are the propositions God revealed to Adam and the later prophets. Logic is stressed here however because empiricism not only makes revelation impossible, it makes thought and truth impossible. Liberal religion therefore must be mythological because, even worse, it must be irrational. And if irrational, of course there can be no meaningful revelation. Nor for that matter can there be any geometry. Geometry needs the universal and irreplaceable laws of logic and these empiricism cannot provide.

Logic is irreplaceable. It is not an arbitrary tautology, a useful framework among others. Various systems of cataloguing books in libraries are possible and several are equally convenient. They are all arbitrary. History can be designated by 800, which is usually given to literature, as by 500, which the dewey-decimal system gives to history. Incidentally for your information, if you don't know it, the dewey-decimal system didn't come from John Dewey it was from another Dewey whose first name I forget, but anyhow it is a different man. While 800 is as good as 500, there is no substitute for the law of contradiction. If dog is the equivalent of not-dog and if two equals three equals four then not only do zoology and mathematics disappear, Victor Hugo and Johann Wolfgang Goethe also disappear. These two men are particularly appropriate examples for they are both, especially Goethe, romanticists. Even so, without logic, Goethe could not have attacked the logic of John's Gospel in Faust, book 1 in these lines. Faust at this point is translating the first verse of the Gospel of John and I haven't quoted the whole matter of the translation, just four lines of it, the first two and the last two. The thing is very clever and you would be delighted to read it. But it starts this way, "Geschrieben steht im Anfang war das wort. hier stock as schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?" Which in English means something like this. Incidentally somebody put Goethe's Faust in English verse with rhyme. Wonderful thing to do but it isn't quite up, you can't translate poetry from one language to another. But it was done and you can get the idea, and I can't do it off the top of my head but it means, "It is written, in the beginning was the word. Here I'm already stuck. Who will help me to make progress?" Then the progress is made in the following six or eight lines where he tries different translations of "in the beginning was the word." Well I forget what they were. He tries several things and he finds them insufficient.

And then finally the spirit comes upon him to help him. See, he asks up here “Wer hilft mir weiter fort?” Mir hilft der Geist. The Spirit helps me. Mir hilft der Geist. Auf einmal sehen rot. Und schrieb der traust im Anfang war die tat. Which means the spirit comes to my aid, now once, now at any rate, at a moment, I get good advice and so with my troubles removed I write down, “in the beginning was the act or the fact if you wish”. Die tat. Goethe apparently is referring to Fichte who made action sorta the basis of his philosophy, though I suppose that gives a rather poor picture of Fichte, its a lot more than that. But anyhow. In the beginning was the activity and that of course is what a Romanticist would say and Goethe has now turned the Gospel of John into Faust or Tannhauser or something else. But Goethe can express his rejection of the divine logos of John 1:1 and express his acceptance of Romantic experience only by using the logic he despises. To repeat, even if it seems wearisome, logic is fixed, universal, necessary, and irreplaceable. As such its laws cannot be deduced from nor abstracted from experience. If dog, cat, typewriter, as well as wort, geist, und tat all mean the same thing, as they must apart from the law of contradiction, empiricism can express nothing. Goethe and Razin, Hegel and Kierkegaard are the same person.

Christianity on the other hand requires and justifies universal propositions as well as distinguishing Ahab from Jehosaphat. The doctrine of the atonement, for example, that Christ’s death was a satisfaction for sin, is a fixed truth and cannot be replaced by its contradictory. To bring the point quite up to date, the teachings of Scripture are not culturally conditioned so as to have been true in antiquity, but antiquated today. Similarly, the Ten Commandments in this decadent age, an acceptance of premarital sex and homosexual practice keeps company with a hue and cry against the dictation theory of inspiration. But what is so bad about dictation? Luke of course acknowledges that he made investigations and it is not supposed that God dictated the wording of the Birth narratives. But how else could Moses have written the Ten Commandments? They were not so much dictated as written out on stone by God’s omnipotence. Note too that the first chapter of Genesis was not the result of historical or geological investigation. The genealogies in 1 Chronicles may have been copied from earlier documents, but in the case of Isaiah, God must have mentioned Cyrus by name. Impotent gods may not be able to speak but Jehovah spoke. Christianity is based on revelation, not experience. Since God is both rational and omnipotent, He faced no problem in adequately expressing His truth in words. Because man is also rational he faces no inherent problem in understanding God’s words. You remember 2 Timothy 3:16: “everything in Scripture is useful for teaching.” Well, if it were not understandable it wouldn’t be useful for teaching. And furthermore all our decisions are to be based on Scripture because Scripture is adequate for every good work. You don’t need any further revelations from the Holy Spirit guiding you this way or that way. Everything that has to do with a good work is found in Scripture, and I should say nowhere else.